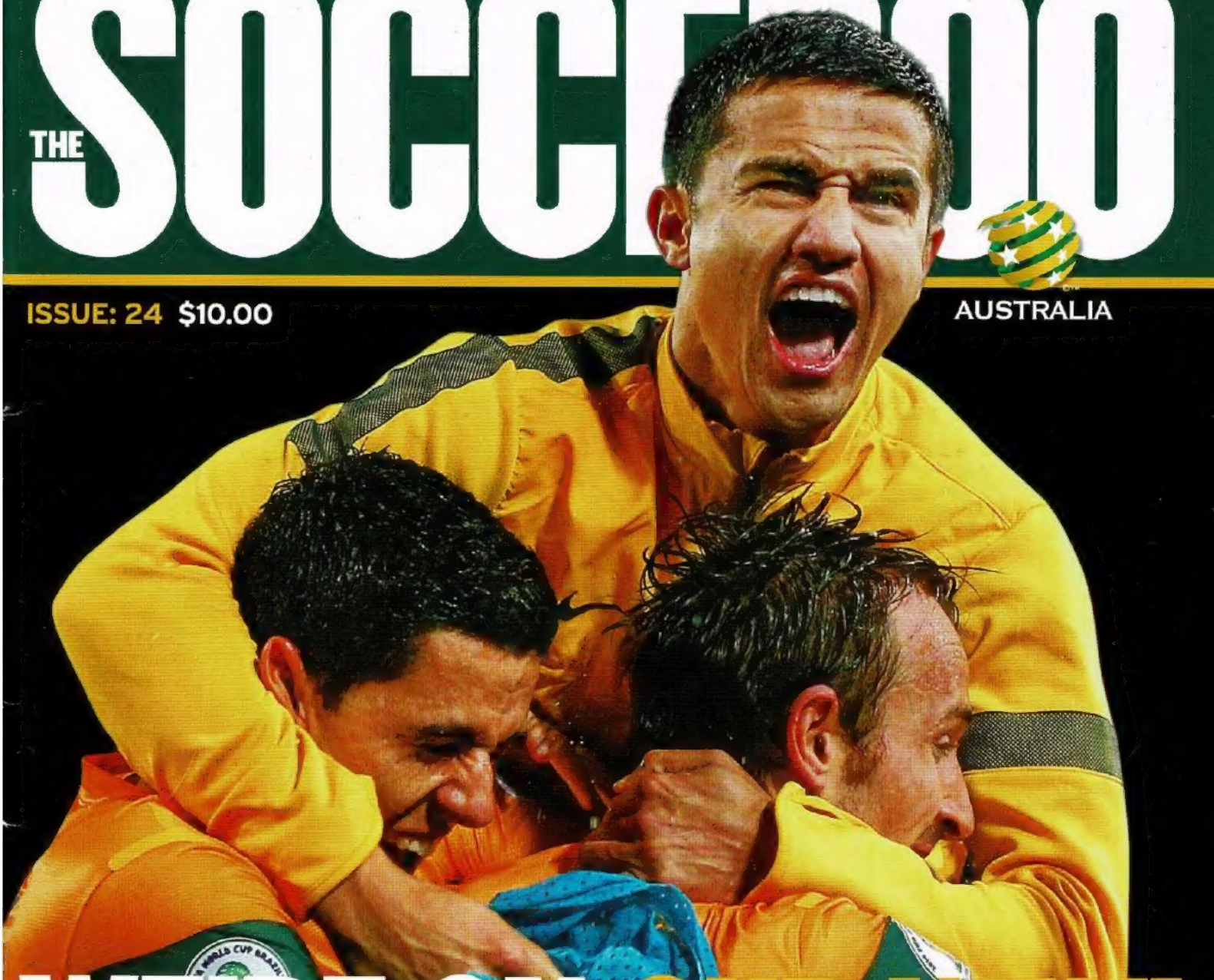
SOCCEROOS v COSTA RICA TUESDAY 19 NOVEMBER 2013 ALLIANZ STADIUM

THE SOCCEROO

ISSUE: 24 $10.00

AUSTRALIA



WE'RE ON OUR WAY!

A new coach, new hope and a World Cup in seven months. Meet the new look Socceroos on the road to Rio 2014

ANGE POSTECOGLOU

We talk to the man handpicked to regenerate, revitalise and renew the national team

NEXT GEN: NEVER SAY NEVER

With a new boss in charge, we look at the next gen who have a chance to book their place on the plane to Brazil

HYUNDAI | NEW THINKING. NEW POSSIBILITIES.

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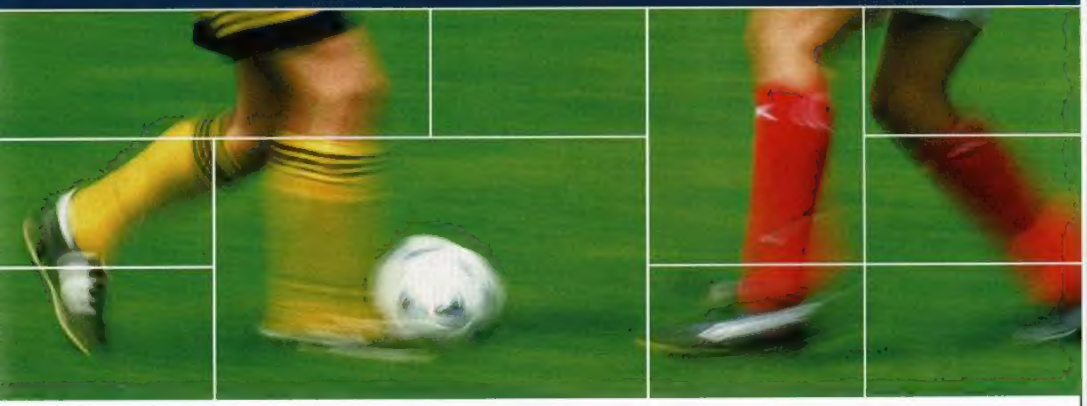
Australian Government
Australian Sports Commission

Winning Partnership



The Australian Sports Commission proudly supports Football Federation Australia

The Australian Sports Commission is the Australian Government agency that develops, supports and invests in sport at all levels in Australia.

Football Federation Australia has worked with the Australian Sports Commission to develop football from community participation to high-level performance.

Football Federation Australia is one of many national sporting organisations that has formed a winning partnership with the Australian Sports Commission.

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FRANK LOWY

FFA Chairman extends a warm welcome to our friends from Costa Rica

Welcome to Sydney for our FIFA World Cup preparation match against Costa Rica here at Allianz Stadium.

I would like to extend a very warm welcome to our friends from Costa Rica who are making their first visit to Australia and I'm sure that their stay in our country will be a very enjoyable one.

Congratulations also to Costa Rica on their recent qualification for the 2014 FIFA World Cup through the CONCACAF Confederation. We wish them all the best for next year's tournament as well.

Tonight marks the starts of a new era for the Socceroos as we witness Ange Postecoglou's first match as our new Head Coach.

Ange has had a fantastic coaching record in the Hyundai A-League and we believe he is the man to lead the Socceroos to the 2014 FIFA World Cup, AFC Asian Cup 2015 and then onto the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

Although we are less than eight months away from the 2014 FIFA World Cup, our preparations are already well advanced for the greatest sporting event in the world.

This will be our fourth appearance at the FIFA World Cup and our third in succession.

Last week we celebrated the 40th anniversary of qualifying for the 1974 FIFA World Cup. The efforts of those Socceroo pioneers have helped create the legacy and reputation that we have today.

I am sure that the new generation of Socceroos will add to that legacy when they take to the field in Brazil next year.

In closing I would like to thank all our partners for their ongoing support and contribution to hosting tonight's match.

My best wishes to both teams for what I am sure will be a competitive and enjoyable match for all.

Frank Lowy AC
CHAIRMAN
FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA

Tonight marks the start of a new era for the Socceroos

FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA

THREE IN A ROW!

It was a long, hard road through Asia, but the Socceroos secured a place at their fourth FIFA World Cup – and their third in a row – with a last gasp vital 1-0 win over Iraq in June. The relief was palpable amid the joy, but the job's not done yet.

COUNTDOWN TO RIO

IT ALL STARTS HERE... NEW BEGINNING

The countdown to Brazil is underway and Ange Postecoglou is up against the clock to revitalise the Socceroos and turn them into FIFA World Cup challengers

WORDS KATHY STONE

So this is what it looks like – the final stretch – a new coach, fresh hope and just 205 days to get it right.

This is the night Ange Postecoglou steps up to the plate to lead the Socceroos for the first time.

The moment Hyundai A-League conqueror, Premiership and Championship-winning coach, becomes international combatant.

Reputations count for nothing. Form is king. This is the clean slate, the new broom, a nod to the past and a glimpse into the future.

No more opportunities for long-term planning, wholesale changes or the slow and steady accumulation of points.

This is the brief moment of clarity when we realise it could have gone better but at least we're here. The countdown to Brazil 2014 is on and it starts now.After more than two years and 14 gruelling matches across Asia we find ourselves at the pointy end.

Qualification for the FIFA World Cup is done and dusted. That hard work is over – now let this hard work begin!

With new leadership, it all starts here.

Tonight the Socceroos face Costa Rica for the first time as both national teams prepare for their fourth FIFA World Cup appearance.

The Aussies will be pulling their third on the trot. Jorge Luis Pinto's men will be striving to match their 1990 bravado when they broke into the round of 16.

This is all about time – just enough, not enough, where did it go?

Just seven months and, if we're lucky, 450 precious minutes of match action to finesse and fine tune before kick-off at the biggest show on earth. Yes, the clock is ticking.

From June 12, 32 teams representing up to six confederations will fight it out across 12 host cities in the beautiful game's global showpiece.

It's that once-every-four-years tournament when the stars step up, fans stand up and nations fire up.

Tonight is the moment for players to stake their claim to the month-long footballing extravaganza – a time to test old heads, young legs and big hearts.

This is Los Ticos versus Socceroos, Postecoglou versus Pinto, fan versus fan, heart versus heartache, hope versus reality.

More than that, this is the time to forge new legends. For battle-hardened soldiers of the Green and Gold to stand shoulder to shoulder with the standard-bearers of the future, for past heroics and future deeds to link across the generations.

Stand as one, lift your scarves and cheer the boys to Brazil where they will take on the world...

A night when diehards run the rule and those in the stands talk of new, lost, last and run-out-of chances.

Above all, this is time to draw on the exhilaration of Germany 2006, to learn from the disappointment of South Africa 2010 and live the next chapter.

So take a deep breath before we plunge headlong into the nail-biting FIFA World Cup lead-up.

Get ready to argue new formations, dark horses, certain starters, outside chances, best positions, swansongs, up-and-comers, old guard, fresh faces, super subs, FIFA World Cup bolters, the best XI.

And why every nation gets lumped in the inevitable *Group of Death*.

Most of all this is the time for fans of the Socceroos to get behind the team that unites a nation. Stand as one, lift your scarves and cheer the boys to Brazil. Time to size up, put up and never shut up.

There will be grit, there may be glory. There will be a moment when we realise, whoever makes the cut, we are all there.

Just as Ange told us: "The Socceroos belong to the people of this nation.

"It's my job to make sure we represent all that's good in Australian football. We need to strive for greatness, to play with spirit and have an unwavering belief in our mission."

Greatness. Spirit. Belief. We can do that. No better time to embrace the motto of Brazil 2014: Juntos num só ritmo – all in one rhythm.

Go Socceroos!

ROUND-UP

A round-up of the latest happenings in Aussie football

A major milestone for the game

Ange Postecoglou's appointment as head coach of the Socceroos was a landmark milestone for how far football has come in this country, says Football Federation Australia Chief Executive David Gallop.

His five-year deal runs until August 2018 and will see Postecoglou take charge of the Socceroos at the 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil, the 2015 AFC Asian Cup Australia and in the 2018 FIFA World Cup Asian qualification matches.

FFA Chairman Frank Lowy said he was pleased that his long-held ambition to appoint an Australian as coach of the Socceroos had been realised.

"It was always our plan that one day an Australian would be appointed coach, and I said precisely that when we appointed the previous coach," said Lowy.

"But I have never taken the view that the coach should be an Australian for the sake of having an Australian. I always believed we should get the best person we can for the job.

"The fact that Ange is the best qualified, and an Australian, achieves our objective."

FFA CEO David Gallop said the appointment of Postecoglou was symbolised the advances made in the past decade under the leadership of Lowy and his Board.

"I'm delighted that the game has reached the point where the best-qualified coach for the Socceroos happens to be someone who's learned his football in this country and who lives and breathes the mission of Australian football," said Gallop.

"It shows how the era of full-time professionalism in the Hyundai A-League and qualification for three consecutive FIFA World Cups is driving technical excellence.

"In Ange, the Socceroos will have a Head Coach who has exceptional experience

and achievements on the domestic and international stage. In any recruitment situation you consider the overall package that the person brings to the role.

"We wanted the best person for the job of coaching the Socceroos to highest possible standards. It's also very significant that Ange has a deep understanding of the culture and passion of Australian football. He's a leader in every sense.

"The FFA Board have moved quickly on the preferred candidate and with the upcoming camp and match in November it was prudent to secure Ange's services this week."

Ange Postecoglou said he felt honoured and humbled to be chosen.

"The Socceroos belong to the people of this nation," said Postecoglou. "It's my job to make sure we represent all that's good in Australian football. We need to strive for greatness, to play with spirit and have an unwavering belief in our mission.

"I was proud to represent my country as a player and I have the same immense feeling of pride today. I thank Frank Lowy, David Gallop and the FFA for having the faith in my ability to do this job successfully."

Gallop also thanked Melbourne Victory for agreeing to release Postecoglou from his contract with the Hyundai A-League club.

"The nation came calling for Ange," said Gallop. "Victory has done the right thing by Australian football and the club is to be commended."

Postecoglou says his final farewell to Victory fans

Farina hails Ange appointment

The last long-term Australian coach of the Socceroos has lauded the appointment of new boss Ange Postecoglou but said he'll need time to put his stamp on the national team.

Now Sydney FC coach Frank Farina, who was in charge of the Socceroos between 1999 and 2005, has fully endorsed Postecoglou's appointment and believes he is the right man to lead Australia out of the doldrums.

Farina said he spoke with Postecoglou before his appointment and stressed the importance of surrounding himself with the right back-up staff to make the job a success.

The former Brisbane and Melbourne Victory coach has a five-year contract and Farina hopes the new man is given time to get things right.

"I'll think he'll do a good job as long as he sets his house up the way he wants it," Farina said. "I think the FFA will let him do that.

"He's got time. I don't think there's any pressure on him for World Cup and there shouldn't be.

"I think the Asian Cup will be the goal. The World Cup will be a great experience and preparation for (Postecoglou's) side and for him to put his stamp on it."

Postecoglou's first job will be to restore the Socceroos' confidence and team morale after two recent heavy friendly defeats against Brazil and France.

Farina was reluctant to tell Postecoglou how to do his job but did admit to giving him one bit of advice.

"He's his own man but I did have a brief exchange with him about bringing your own people in," said Farina. "He's not silly and he's probably already planning to do that.

"You've got to surround yourself with people you can trust and that are basically working on the same page as you."

FACTFILE

ANGE POSTECOGLOU

Nationality: Australian
Date of Birth: 27 August 1965
Club playing career:
1984-1993 South Melbourne (NSL)
193 games (19 goals)
1984 NSL Premiers (South Melbourne)
1984 NSL Champions (South Melbourne)
1985 NSL Premiers (South Melbourne)
1990/91 NSL Champions (South Melbourne)
1992/93 NSL Premiers (South Melbourne)
Representative playing career:
1986-88 Socceroos 4 games (0 goals)
Coaching career:
1996 - 2000 South Melbourne (NSL)
2000 - 2007 Australian U20 National Team
2008 Panachaiki
2009 - 2012 Brisbane Roar (Hyundai A-League)
2012 - 2013 Melbourne Victory (Hyundai A-League)
Coaching achievements:
1997/98 National Soccer League Premiers (South Melbourne)
1997/98 National Soccer League Champions (South Melbourne)
1998/99 National Soccer League Champions (South Melbourne)
1999 Oceania Club Champions (South Melbourne)
2000 Coached South Melbourne at FIFA Club World Championships
2010/11 Hyundai A-League Premiers (Brisbane Roar)
2010/11 Hyundai A-League Coach of the Year
2011 Hyundai A-League Champions (Brisbane Roar)
2012 Hyundai A-League Champions (Brisbane Roar)
2013 Voted as Head Coach of the Foxtel A-League All Stars v Manchester United

Sermanni returns to haunt Matildas

FORMER boss Tom Sermanni showed his old side no mercy when he coached the USA to a convincing 4-0 win over the Westfield Matildas last month.

Four goals undid the Aussies with Lauren Holiday (6'), Carli Lloyd (14'), Abby Wambach (56') and Christen Press (90+2') all scoring for the two-time world champions.

Australia forward Lisa De Vanna was a constant menace to the USA backline, and she forced goalkeeper Hope Solo into several saves.

The Westfield Matildas were put on the back foot by two exceptional early strikes but recovered their composure to turn the match into a tough contest.

Reigning FIFA Women's World Player of the Year Abby Wambach added a third after the break, while an injury-time goal further blew out the scoreline.

"The good thing is that we created four of five very good opportunities in the first half," said Hesterine De Reus, who replaced Sermanni as head coach of the Westfield Matildas this year.

"Our forward line was very dangerous in the first half and we created opportunities through our build-up which is a good thing.

"The defending part of our game was not good enough. Conceding four goals is way too much.

"In the second half we became tired and dropped a bit more defensively which created a big space in the midfield so we created some problems for ourselves.

"It is not surprising as we are out of season so there have not been so many opportunities to play tough football for most of the girls."

Meanwhile, the Young Matildas went down 2-1 to Korea Republic in their final match of the AFC U-19 Women's Championship in Nanjing, China.

The result saw the Koreans crowned Champions and they will now represent Asia at the FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup next year along with DPR Korea and China PR.

Korea gained the ascendancy early and took the lead on 20 minutes when skipper Jang Sel-gi gave her side a 1-0 advantage.

The Young Matildas weren't going down without a fight and when Georgia Yeoman-Dale found the back of the net on 33 minutes the teams were all square once again.

Lee Do-sam however broke the deadlock with halftime approaching after converting her penalty kick and giving the Koreans a 2-1 lead that would not be tracked down.

GET REVVED UP FOR RIO

GET REVVED UP FOR RIO

The biggest show on earth kicks off in seven months and Australia have booked their place. In December we find out who we face in the group stages. The Socceroos will be there – but will you?

WORDS KATHY STONE

From June 12-July 13, all eyes will be on the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. It's the biggest show on earth - and the Socceroos will be right in the middle of it for the third time running (and our fourth overall).

More than 3 million tickets will snapped up for the month-long feast of football which will be rolled out across 12 spectacular cities and beamed to an audience of billions in more than 200 countries worldwide.

But before all that can happen, the fate of nations will be decided at the Costa do Sauípe Resort, Bahai on December 6 (local time) for the final draw to determine the make-up of the eight FIFA World Cup groups.

Proving that football creates just as much drama off the pitch as on, hundreds of millions around the world are expected to watch the televised event – the same number that tune in for a FIFA World Cup match.

Not a ball will be kicked, but a few will be drawn, a group of death will be claimed and team coaches will begin masterminding the demise of their illustrious opponents - and hoping they are not their group's easybeats.

Australia, facing our fourth FIFA World Cup campaign, will not be seeded so we can expect to face some heavyweight challengers in the fight to match our 2010 heroics and push on to the round of 16.

WHO WILL BE THERE

The host country will be bulging with fans, sightseers, 192 million Brazilians, platoons of media... and 32 national football teams. Already 21 countries have qualified but it is last chance saloon for another 22 who will fight it out for the right to play on the world stage.

Australia and Costa Rica have already booked their tickets to Brazil and by the time the two teams walk out onto the pitch at Allianz Stadium tonight, another six countries will know whether their stars will also be heading for the departure lounge.

Two intercontinental play-offs over two legs, will culminate on November 20 – both with relevance to the Socceroos. Fellow Asian Football Confederation member Jordan face former FIFA World Cup winners Uruguay in a bid to join Australia, Japan, Korea Republic and Iran at football's showpiece event.

Meanwhile our All Whites neighbours New Zealand will be in the fight of their lives against Mexico. Like the Socceroos, the Kiwis endured an extended period in the footballing wilderness – 28 years to be exact – before lining up for their second FIFA World Cup appearance in South Africa, 2010.

In contrast, 14 times FIFA World Cup veterans El Tri – who haven't missed a gig ▸

Juntos num só ritmo! The slogan for Brazil's 2014 FIFA World Cup means all with one rhythm

at football's tournament of tournaments since 1990 – are somewhat miffed to find themselves in this position. New Zealand coach and former Wellington Phoenix mentor, Ricki Herbert, is piling on the pressure ahead of the home and away playoffs, questioning the CONCACAF powerhouse's "big match" temperament.

In Europe, it's sudden death as Greece take on Romania, Portugal face Sweden, Ukraine line up against France and Iceland clash with Croatia on November 19.

WHERE WILL IT ALL GO OFF

Brazil is not just home to pristine sandy white beaches and samba-fuelled metropolises. Host cities for World Cup games will give football fans the full spectrum of the nation's dramatic landscape. From tropical Manaus in the north, adjacent to the Amazon rainforest, to the leafy Porto Alegre in the south, and the intoxicating Rio de Janeiro with its famous Copacabana and Ipanema beaches, mountains, and the iconic Cristo Redentor, its arms outstretched over paradise. Half of the host cities have had stadiums built especially for the FIFA World Cup, while others have been rebuilt or upgraded. The tournament will kick-off in the Arena de Sao Paulo, constructed in the Corintianos stronghold of Itaquera, and culminate in the Estadio do Maracana, Rio de Janeiro, which will host seven matches, more than any other venue during the tournament. Brazil's largest football ground, it holds a capacity crowd of 73, 531.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN

It's easy enough to get caught up in FIFA World Cup magic – even if you're a novice to the game. And what does it really matter if you don't know your Les Bleus from your Nationalmannschaft? When all is said done, an inflatable kangaroo, a month of snacks, comfortable couch and one of those wide screen tellies will usually do a job.

But to really set the scene, ditch the blow up roo for a *Fuleco*. Not a Zezeco or Amijubi – the nicknames rejected by a majority of 1.7 million Brazilians who took part in a poll to name the official mascot, which is a three-banded armadillo. The name is a mash of futebol (football) and ecologia (ecology), presumably encouraging fans to dispose of their footballs and armadillos in an environmentally sustainable way.

The official FIFA World Cup football also has a name. The title adidas "*Brazuca*" (a term used to express national pride) was chosen in a naming competition that included Bossa Nova and Carnavalesca on a shortlist. Previous FIFA World Cup footballs have received mixed reactions, most noticeably the unpredictable 2010 Jabulani said to be imbued with mystical powers to drive goalkeepers potty.

Mercifully, vuvuzelas – the two-foot long plastic hooters from the same FIFA World Cup in South Africa – have been laid to rest. The monstrously droning instruments (of torture) won't be missed by many, but just in case, the Brazilians have come up with their own take on them. The latest word in football musical accompaniment is a specially created percussion instrument called the caxirola. Certified by the Brazilian Ministry of Sports, the flat-bottomed yellow and green plastic baskets are shaken like maracas (and apparently hurled like missiles...which is why they're banned from FIFA World Cup stadiums.

Which brings us to – *Juntos num só ritmo*! The slogan for the world's biggest sporting celebration which means all with one rhythm. Perfect if you get caught in a conga-line in Rio but more specifically a nice reminder to celebrate the rhythms in football, nature and Brazilian culture which are enjoyed worldwide.

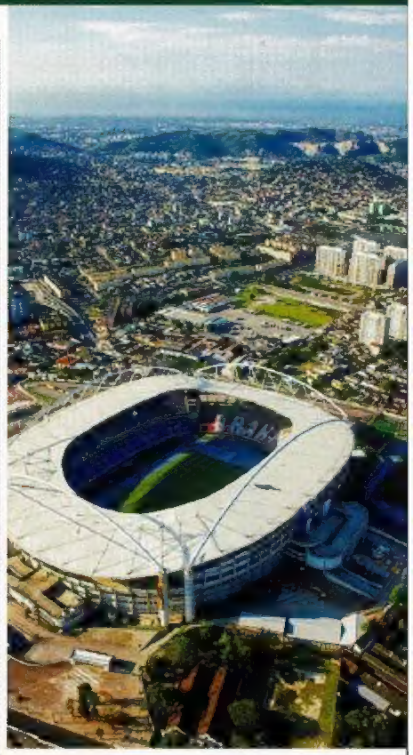
WHAT'S IT ALL FOR?

After all the tears and tantrums have subsided – and that's just on the pitch – it all comes down to this: an 18 carat gold, 36.8cm high trophy that only eight nations have ever held aloft (including its Jules Rimet trophy predecessor). England, France and Spain have each won the title once, Uruguay and Argentina twice, Germany three times, Italy four and – fittingly – Brazil five times where legendary names of football such as Pele, Garrincha, Didi, Leonidas, Vava, Zagallo, Tostão, Zico, Jairzinho, Carlos Alberto, Socrates, Bebeto, Romario, Cafu, Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos have lined up for the Seleção

In its previous incarnation, the trophy was variously lost, stolen, hidden in a shoebox under the bed to escape the clutches of occupying troops during WWII, and dug up in an English garden by a dog called Pickles.

These days, of course, the world's most sought-after sporting accessory travels in style, and, in the lead-up to this latest FIFA World Cup, has been globe-trotting on an all-expenses paid 90-country tour which concludes with visits to each of the 26 states in Brazil. All before one of 32 footballing teams will hold it high.

The world will be watching. Australia will be there. C'mon Socceroos. ●



Fans prepare to fly out

Anywhere the Socceroos play, Aussie fans will be there

WHEN the Socceroos stride out onto the pitch at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil they can expect a rousing reception from the Green and Gold faithful.

Ange Postecoglou's men may be long shots to emerge victorious from the fires of international battle but their supporters won't be taking a backward step.

Tickets requests from Australia are the seventh highest at 88,082 after Brazil (4, 368, 029), USA (374, 065), Argentina (266,937), Germany (134,899), Chile (102, 288) and England (96, 780).

On a per capita basis it makes Aussie fans among the most avid across the globe, with Japan (69,806), Colombia (55,379) and Canada (49,968) rounding out the top 10.

Earlier this month a random selection draw for the first phase of ticket sales saw almost 900,000 allocated to people from 188 countries. The bulk went to Brazil, but fifth in line were fans from Down Under. Another 220,000 tickets went up for grabs on November 11.

Ticket or not, Sydneysider Michelle Prasad and her sister Kirsty will be winging their way to Rio. The Socceroo fanatics attended the last two FIFA World Cups and plan to make it three on the trot.

"We're both huge football fans," Michelle said, pointing out she even has a pair of green shoes. "We've followed the Socceroos since we were young.

"It's kind of a family event for us in honour of my dad who passed away 14 years ago now. He didn't get to attend any of the World Cups so we're going for him and hopefully he follows with us."

The sisters were in Kaiserslautern for that memorable day in 2006 when a Tim Cahill-inspired comeback in the final minutes of the game roused the Socceroos to a 3-1 win over Japan.

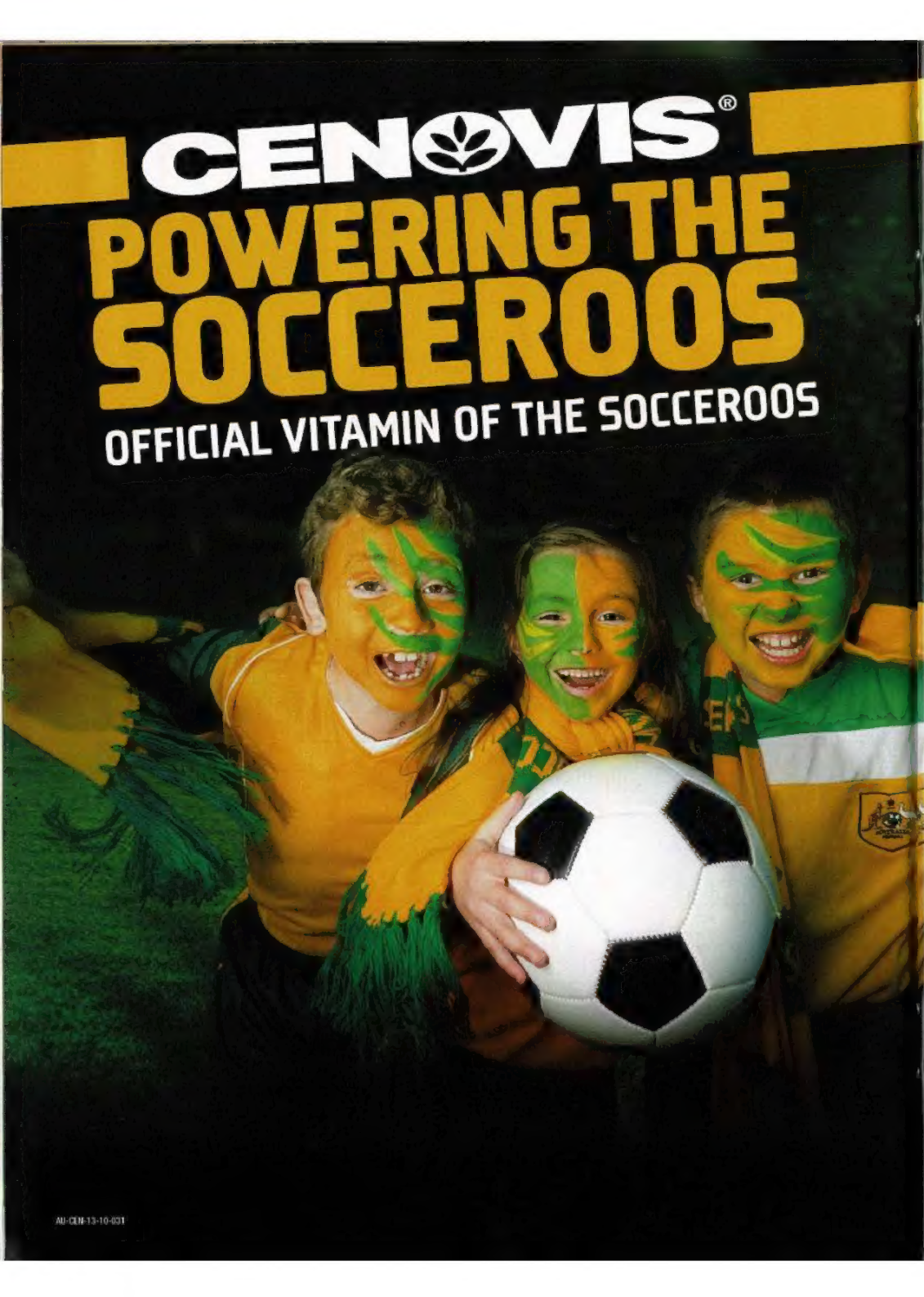
"I think watching every Socceroos game has some sentimental value to it," Michelle said. "But that first game was amazing. Kirsty and I both had tears in our eyes. We were in awe.

"Even if I didn't know football, with no knowledge of anything of the game or the players or anything like that, the World Cup atmosphere is amazing. It changes you completely."

CENOVIS®

POWERING THE SOCCEROOS

OFFICIAL VITAMIN OF THE SOCCEROOS



Cenovis is proud to join the Socceroos family as Official Vitamin Partner.

Here at Cenovis, we know families - and we know that a family is a lot like a team. They work together to achieve goals, as well as encouraging and inspiring one another.

Cenovis is committed to inspiring more Australian families to live healthily together, by offering great quality products they can trust.

As the Socceroos head to Brazil, we're proud to support the health of their family. We'll not only be helping to power the team on the field but also within the wider Socceroos family - from the behind the scenes teams that keep the players healthy to the families of the Socceroos and of course the supporters.

In a busy year for football, Cenovis, with the help of the Socceroos, will inspire Australian families to live healthy.

AU-CEN-13-10-031

NEW ERA NEW START NEW ROOS

The Socceroos have ridden a rollercoaster of emotion since the high of qualifying for the 2014 FIFA World Cup in June, only to be swiftly brought down to earth by thumping defeats against Brazil and France. Now though there is a new optimism and a new beginning...

KATHY STONE

FIVE months is a long time in Australian football – a helter skelter ride of unimaginable highs and lows from jubilation to desperation, and finally anticipation.

Rewind to June 18 when the Socceroos clinched automatic qualification to their third straight FIFA World Cup. They left it nail-bitingly late – a single headed goal against an under-strength Iraq on 83 minutes courtesy of substitute striker Josh Kennedy.

Euphoria erupted in Sydney's sold-out ANZ Stadium, where eight years earlier the Socceroos ended 32 years in the footballing wilderness by defeating Uruguay to qualify for the 2006 FIFA World Cup.

In contrast, the latest feat was accomplished on the back of a long and erratic campaign through Asia, starting in 2011 with a come-from-behind victory against lowly-ranked but defiant Thailand.

One year out from Brazil, as green and gold tape rained down on players and football chiefs alike, under-pressure coach Holger Osieck asked fans to put aside the analysis for one night and savour the moment.

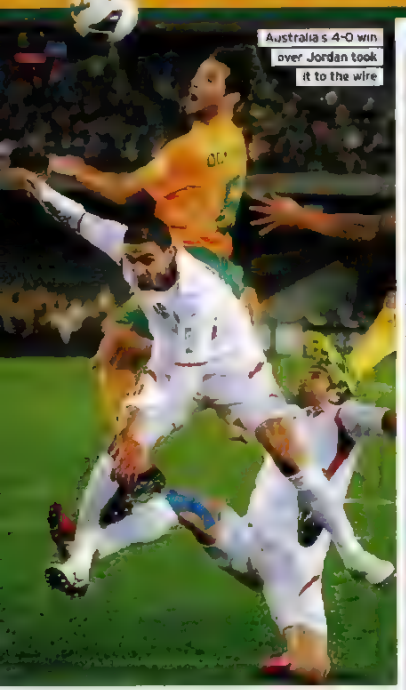
Tonight, he said was the players' "right and privilege to enjoy our qualification". Mission accomplished. Veteran skipper Lucas Neill echoed the sentiments.

"I'm proud of everybody," Neill said. "It's been a really hard campaign but we showed our mental strength. I'm sorry it wasn't pretty but we beat them. We've got to keep pushing ourselves. Let's look at the positives tonight – we're going to Brazil!"

Fast forward to October 12, at the Parc des Princes in Paris, where the shellshocked Socceroos suffered a 6-0 shellacking at the feet of Les Bleus. A month earlier, Osieck's men were hit for six by Brazil.

A 3-0 win against a tame Canada was still to come, but by then Football Federation Australia had called time on the German mentor's tenure. About 10 days later, Melbourne Victory coach Ange Postecoglou,48, was unveiled as the man to lead the national team to Rio. ▸

NEW ERA, NEW START, NEW ROOS



Australia's 4-0 win over Jordan took it to the wire

A last gasp win over Iraq was just enough

A gutsy draw against Japan kept hope alive

Postecoglou - a former Socceroo and ex-youth international coach - was humble in accepting the post. "The Socceroos belong to the people of this nation," he said. "It's my job to make sure we represent all that's good in Australian football."

FFA chief David Gallop said of the appointment: "I'm delighted that the game has reached the point where the best-qualified coach for the Socceroos happens to be someone who's learned his football in this country and who lives and breathes the mission of Australian football."

Postecoglou is not the first Australian to lead the Socceroos to a FIFA World Cup. Back in 1974, Yugoslavian migrant - and proud Aussie - Rale Rasic took a squad of semi-professionals to Germany. Since then however, the weight of FIFA World Cup duty has rested on foreign shoulders - master tactician, Guus Hiddink, in 2006 and his Dutch compatriot Pim Verbeek, in South Africa 2010.

With the next football extravaganza just seven months away, the mood has shifted. Suddenly it's all about the future. At a time when other FIFA World Cup teams are heads down tweaking and fine-tuning their squads, Australian football has embraced a whole new language. Phrases like a "fresh start" and "new beginnings" are being tossed about.

Milligan was unprepared for the changes in Postecoglou: "The difference was enormous."

Few are better placed to understand the potential impact of Postecoglou's appointment than Mark Milligan. The 28-year-old Socceroo worked under him through one FIFA U-20 World Cup and in preparation for another. Years later, Postecoglou brought him to Victory as a key piece in the club's rebuild.

Both had changed in the intervening years. Milligan chased his ambitions overseas with stints at Chinese Super League outfit, Shanghai Shenhua, and Japanese side JEF United Chiba.

Postecoglou - a titan of the old National Soccer League - had built a formidable reputation at Hyundai A-League outfit Brisbane Roar, where he masterminded a 36-game undefeated streak, the longest of any football code in the history of Australian sport.

He led the Queensland club to back-to-back Championships and a Premiership, establishing himself as the most successful football coach in the country. Milligan said he was unprepared for the changes in Postecoglou

"It was interesting actually coming back to Melbourne because you notice changes in players and you understand how players grow as they get older, mature and things like that," he said.

"But it's not often you get a chance to work under a coach again so long after and see how they've developed. Obviously he was a very good coach when I was younger but the difference when I came into Victory was enormous.

"As a player I think sometimes you don't take much notice of the fact that coaches are always evolving and always learning the good ones are - and Ange was the perfect example.

"It's not just that he has fresh ideas. I know that he really believes in what he's teaching to his players and he'll stick by that.

"And I think the way that Australian football is, that's definitely something we need We need to feel from the coach that he truly believes in what we're doing on the pitch. That confidence runs through the team.

"When the coach is confident and believes in the players and the system it always rubs off the team, whether that's new players coming into the team or the older generation. Like I said players are always learning and you always pick up new things from people you work with."

There is talk of a new era. Most of the Golden Generation that enthralled Australian fans in the 2006 FIFA World Cup are in their 30s. The shock retirement of goalkeeping great Mark Schwarzer, 41, brought the issue of regeneration into sharp focus. ▸

Le final straw - losing to France ended Osieck era

Celebrations as Socceroos book their place in Brazil

Farewell to an icon

Mark Schwarzer - 'undoubtedly one of the all-time greats of the Socceroos...'

Even the greats have to call it a day.

After playing a pivotal role in securing Australia's third straight FIFA World Cup appearance Mark Schwarzer pulled the plug on an epic international career spanning two decades and two world cups.

The most capped Socceroo in history, the sporting icon donned the gloves a record 109 times for his country, which included two FIFA World Cups.

But his decision to leave English Premier League side Fulham to take up the No.2 at Chelsea resulted in a lack of game time for the 41-year-old.

Fellow Aussie legend Tim Cahill expressed shock at the veteran custodian's decision to bow out before Brazil 2014.

"He's one of the greatest ambassadors to have played the game and a true gentleman on and off the park," Cahill said.

"He was one of the reasons we were so successful as a national team. He was always the go-to guy. His experience just [illegible] us to this last FIFA World Cup [illegible] priceless.

One of Australia's Golden Generation, Schwarzer was voted FFA Footballer of the Year in both 2009 and 2010 and received the Order of Australia Medal. He currently sits eighth for all-time English Premier League appearances.

News of his retirement from international football came just hours before Ange Postecoglou announced his first Socceroos squad, and the newly appointed head coach was quick to pay tribute to him.

He's undoubtedly one of the all-time greats of the Socceroos, a great servant, always available to play for his national team and sometimes under difficult circumstances - an absolute icon of our game," Postecoglou said.

"I think it's really important that when we talk about culture and we talk about restoring pride to our national team shirt that the champions of our game - and Mark is right up there - get honoured in the right way.

Rightfully judged Australia's greatest-ever goalkeeper, Schwarzer's double-save in the penalty shootout against Uruguay in 2005 remains a defining moment in Australian sporting history.

In front of a packed ANZ Stadium, he set the scene for John Aloisi's winning penalty which lead Australia back into the FIFA World Cup after 32 years in the wilderness.

In the commentary box on that historic night, Simon Hill and Craig Foster captured the exhilaration as the big man propelled himself into Australian football folklore. We won't hear the likes of these words again.

"Saved by Schwarzer - he's done it again in the shootout Mark Schwarzer is the hero for Australia. OHHHH, great save again by Schwarzer! It's a huge save. Wonderful save. It's as big as we've ever seen in Australia. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it is [illegible] heart that you need to make World Cups. Mark Schwarzer you are a champion...

See our four page picture tribute to the great man, starting on page 56.

ROAD TO RIO

The final round - how we got there

Iran, Korea Republic (Group A), Japan and Australia (Group B) qualified automatically for Brazil 2014. Jordan went into an intercontinental play-off against Uruguay after winning a penalty shootout against Uzbekistan in a third-placed showdown.

This is how the Socceroos booked their ticket to Brazil in the final round...

JUNE 18, 2013
Australia 1 : 0 Iraq

JUNE 11, 2013
Australia 4 : 0 Jordan

JUNE 4, 2013
Japan 1 : **1 Australia**

MAR 26, 2013
Australia 2 : 2 Oman

OCT 16, 2012
Iraq 1 : **2 Australia**

SEPT 11, 2012
Jordan 2 : 1 Australia

JUNE 12, 2012
Australia 1 : 1 Japan

JUNE 8, 2012
Oman 0 : **0 Australia**

GROUP B

TEAM	P	W	D	L	F	L	PTS
Japan	8	5	2	1	16	5	17
Australia	8	5	2	1	12	7	17
Jordan	8	2	1	5	7	15	7
Oman	8	1	3	4	7	10	6
Iraq	8	1	2	5	4	8	5

"Whenever I play for the Socceroos, I've always given 100 per cent," he told *Fox Sports*. "I've been able to focus all my energy on playing for my country, getting in the best possible condition I can be in and be committed to do all the travelling and do the commitment of being a Socceroo.

"I felt that if I can't do it justice and have the right mental approach to play for the national team, then I shouldn't be playing. I know it's the right time."

In announcing his first squad, Postecoglou made it clear there was no big broom up his sleeve. He wasn't interested in wholesale change for the sake of it.

Some of the heroes of Kaiserslautern were still in his squad. Mark Bresciano, Tim Cahill, Lucas Neill and Josh Kennedy.

He paid tribute to the foot soldiers and stars of the Green and Gold who had brought the team to the brink of yet another FIFA World Cup. Milligan believes if the coach can develop and grow then so can the players.

He's excited by what can be achieved in seven months. Time to put aside the catastrophes of Paris and Brasilia, he said, and look to Rio.

"Players can learn and adapt absolutely," he added. "It's a chance for everyone I guess to put the (recent) past behind us and really just be positive towards the future.

"I think there a lot of people who are going to be feeling refreshed by the idea that a new coach has come in and I guess it's a new beginning for a lot of players to really shine.

"I think Ange will bring a lot of structure and the technical and tactical side of things which you can teach to international players."

Milligan is one who feels the lure of fresh possibilities. The defensive mid was called-up to the two previous World Cups without getting a run. He credits Osieck with bringing him back into the fold but feels the timing is right for Postecoglou.

"There's a lot of change going on at the moment," he said. "It's a fresh opportunity for everybody to put their best foot forward and working towards getting into that WC squad.

"I don't think there will be any complacency at all – from anybody – especially after the two results before Canada. I think it's definitely more looking forward that looking behind.

"We're very aware that we need to be better. And if we want to be part of the Brazil tournament as individuals we really need to come together as a team." ●

"It's an opportunity for everybody to put their best foot forward and get into that WC squad"

MEET YOUR SOCCEROOS

Meet the squad picked by Socceroos head coach Ange Postecoglou for tonight's clash

AUSTRALIA

Coaches

Ange **Postecoglou**

Position Head Coach

After a succession of foreign coaches, Australia turned to local hero Ange Postecoglou to the lead the Socceroos at Brazil 2014. The former U20s mentor cemented a formidable reputation in the Hyundai A-League by masterminding back to back Championships and a Premiership at Brisbane Roar and was in the process of revolutionising Melbourne Victory when he answered his country's call.

Aurelio **Vidmar**

Position Assistant coach

The former Adelaide United and Olyroos coach was Holger Osieck's right hand man throughout qualification for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. He took over the reins temporarily when the German was sacked in the aftermath of crushing 6-0 defeats to Brazil and France. During his one game in charge, the 46-year-old Adelaide native oversaw Australia's morale-boosting 3-0 victory against lowly-ranked Canada.

SOCCEROOS STAFF

Head Coach: **Ange Postecoglou**
Team Manager: **Gary Moretti**
Coach: **Aurelio Vidmar**
Football Conditioner: **Scott Miller**
Goalkeeper Coach: **Tony Franken**
Technical Analyst: **Ron Smith**
Doctor: **Dr Mark Jones**
Senior Physiotherapist: **Les Gelis**
Physiotherapist: **Kurt Lisle**
Masseur: **Luke Attwell**
Equipment Manager: **Dom Rabsch**
Equip & Admin Asst: **Vito Basile**
Media Manager: **David Mason**
Digital Content & TV Unit: **Ben Coonan**
Security Manager: **Mark Saliba**

Goalkeepers

Mitch **Langerak**

Age 25 **Position** Goalkeeper
Club Borussia Dortmund
Appearances 2

The former Melbourne Victory custodian secured a four year-deal with German powerhouse Borussia Dortmund in 2010 and has been on the winning side in 13 of his 14 games between the sticks. A suspension to first choice keeper Roman Weidenfeller gave the gifted shot-stopper his first taste of Champions League action which included a 3-0 home win over Olympic Marseille

Mat **Ryan**

Age 21 **Position** Goalkeeper
Club Club Brugge
Appearances 3

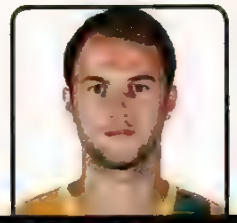
Australia's goalkeeping future is good hands thanks in large part to the former Central Coast Mariners star. Ryan, who notched up a record 12 clean sheets in his first season in the Hyundai A-League, signed for Club Brugge in May where, as first choice keeper, he immediately set about impressing the Belgian Pro League outfit with a clean sheet on debut, and has had many more since

Defenders

Jason **Davidson**

Age 22 **Position** Left Back
Club Heracles Almelo
Appearances 3

The son of Socceroo great Alan Davidson hasn't featured prominently so far but he could be the answer to Australia's left back woes. His first senior call-up was one to forget, coming on as a substitute against Scotland and chipping in with an own goal, but solid and consistent form for Heracles in the Dutch topflight has put him firmly back in the frame for Brazil.



Ivan **Franjic**

Age 26 **Position** Right Back
Club Brisbane Roar
Appearances 5

National team opportunities have been thin on the ground, but the versatile player is in scintillating form for Brisbane Roar, albeit further up the park - and we could now see a lot more of him. New Socceroos coach Ange Postecoglou is a big believer and, with Dynamo Moscow's Luke Wilkshire omitted from the squad, the Hyundai A-League star has his best chance yet for selection.

Ryan **McGowan**

Age 24 **Position** Defender
Club Shandong Luneng Taishan
Appearances 7

Considered to have been unfairly scapegoated for Australia's recent horror show against Brazil, the Adelaide born defender could get his shot at redemption against Costa Rica. After five years playing in Scotland, McGowan - who can play anywhere across the back four - made the move to the Chinese Super League this year and immediately found himself on the Socceroos radar

Defenders

Lucas **Neill**

Age 35 **Position** Defender
Club Omiya Ardija
Appearances 95

The veteran defender is keen to make his third consecutive World Cup appearance but is under pressure from a crop of ambitious youngsters snapping at his heels. A charismatic leader and defensive lynchpin over the years, Neill enjoyed a 15-year playing career in England and after stints in the UAE and Sydney FC in the Hyundai A-League, is currently plying his trade in Japan.

Rhys **Williams**

Age 25 **Position** Centre Back/Right Back
Club Middlesbrough
Appearances 13

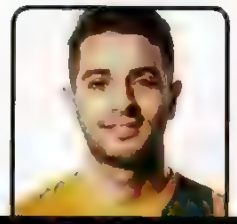
The Middlesbrough defender was eligible to play for several countries but after briefly flirting with Wales U21s, pledged allegiance to Australia. Can play at right back or central defence and has built an impressive reputation in the English Championship where he garners regular EPL interest Unfortunately, injuries have curtailed his opportunities for club and country

Alex **Wilkinson**

Age 29 **Position** Centre Back
Club Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors
Appearances 0

Better late than never for the ex-Central Coast Mariners skipper. The most obvious beneficiary from the change in the Socceroos coach, Wilkinson - a former youth international - has yet to earn a senior cap. But his performances for K-League high-flyers Jeonbuk Hyundai haven't gone unnoticed by Postecoglou who is champing at the bit to overhaul a troublesome central defence

Defenders

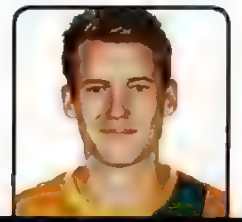


Michael **Zullo**

Age 25 **Position** Left Winger/Left Back
Club Adelaide United (loan)
Appearances 10

One of three Brisbane Roar youngsters snapped up by Eredivisie side Utrecht in 2010, the diminutive player has quick feet and a big engine to power up and down the left flank. He made 34 appearances for the Dutch club, but after struggling to break into the first team this season, signed a one-year loan deal to join the Josep Gombau revolution at Adelaide United.

Midfielders



Oliver **Bozanic**

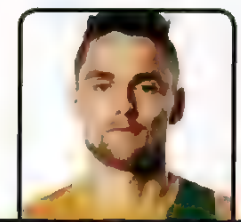
Age 24 **Position** Midfielder
Club FC Luzern
Appearances 1

The former Reading player and Olyroos skipper spent three years in England before returning to the Hyundai A-League, but has clearly stepped it up a notch since making the move to Luzern. The Swiss Super League Player of the Month for August has bagged five goals in 14 appearances. Versatile, with a pinpoint crossing ability Bozanic is starting to deliver on his early promise

Mark **Bresciano**

Age 33 **Position** Attacking Mid/Winger
Club Al-Gharafa
Appearances 72

The legs may not be as fast but the footballing brain is still razor sharp. "Bresh" signed for Serie A side Parma in 2002 for €7 million, at the time a record fee for an Aussie. A move to the Middle East after 12 years in Italy has reinvigorated his career. Master of the killer pass, the creative fulcrum has chipped in with some crucial campaign-saving goals, most memorably against Uruguay in 2005



James **Holland**

Age 24 **Position** Midfielder
Club Austria Wien
Appearances 12

Holland already has championship silverware with Newcastle Jets and Austria Wien but there's no doubt a spot on the plane to Brazil would be the icing on the cake. After struggling for game time in the Eredivisie, the former Young Socceroos skipper is getting plenty of opportunity to shine in the Austria Bundesliga where he's also banked some Champions League experience.

Midfielders

Mile **Jedinak**

Age 29 **Position** Midfielder
Club Crystal Palace
Appearances 41

The no-nonsense holding midfielder was a key factor in Crystal Palace winning promotion last season and is Australia's only regular starter in the English Premier League. But the Eagles skipper will have to dig deep if the last-placed club is to avoid relegation. Renowned for his work ethic and imposing physical presence, his leadership qualities could be crucial as the Socceroos look to regenerate.

Matt **McKay**

Age 30 **Position** Midfielder/Left Back
Club Brisbane Roar
Appearances 44

The Socceroos coach knows exactly what McKay brings to a team. The midfield livewire skippered Brisbane Roar during Postecoglou's title-winning reign and recently returned to the Hyundai A-League after stints overseas. Arguably his best night in the Green and Gold was a MOM performance during the AFC Asian Cup 2011 when he set up three goals in a 6-0 semi-final drubbing of Uzbekistan.

Mark **Milligan**

Age 27 **Position** Holding Midfielder
Club Melbourne Victory
Appearances 25

The Melbourne Victory skipper is a wanted man, having spurned lucrative offers from the English Premier League and Middle East. A natural leader traditionally used as a centre back, his move to a holding midfield role has capitalised on his positioning and range of passing. Straddling the Golden Age and Generation Next, Milligan is now one of the first names on the national team sheet.

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Midfielders

Tommy Oar

Age 21 **Position** Attacking Mid/Winger
Club FC Utrecht
Appearances 11

Speed, skill and a willingness to run at players, Oar has been wearing the 'next big thing' tag ever since he burst onto the scene at Brisbane Roar as an unknown 17-year-old. He missed the cut for the 2010 FIFA World Cup after being selected in the preliminary squad, but underlined his value to the Green and Gold with an away goal against Japan that helped the Aussies secure a place at Brazil

Tom Rogic

Age 20 **Position** Attacking Midfielder
Club Celtic
Appearances 7

The former national futsal player's meteoric rise to prominence began in 2011 when he won Nike's The Chance global talent search. From there it was a quick trip to the Hyundai A-League champs, Central Coast Mariners, before signing a long-term deal with Scottish giants, Celtic. The gifted playmaker comes with big raps but a dearth of game time is proving problematic ahead of Brazil.

Dario Vidosic

Age 26 **Position** Attacking Midfielder
Club FC Sion
Appearances 16

Another prodigious talent plucked from the Brisbane Roar nursery, the classy playmaker notched up 15 goals in 60 matches for Adelaide United last season. He recently completed a move to the Swiss Super League where he has hit top form, scoring four goals in eight appearances, including an assist and goal in a 3-0 romp over fellow Aussie Oliver Bozanic's FC Luzern.

Strikers

Tim Cahill

Age 33 **Position** Attacking Midfielder
Club New York Red Bulls
Appearances 63

Australia's first-ever FIFA World Cup goal scorer, Cahill's last-ditch brace against Japan in 2006 is the stuff of legend. Celebrated for his aerial ability, the English Premier League veteran made a seamless switch to the MLS New York Red Bulls in 2012 after eight career defining years at Everton. Last month's strike just seven seconds into a 3-0 win was the quickest goal in MLS history.

Strikers

Josh Kennedy

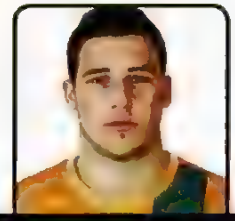
Age 31 **Position** Striker
Club Nagoya Grampus
Appearances 34

It's only fitting the beanpole striker should be in the frame for his third FIFA World Cup appearance after sealing a spot at Brazil in the last qualification match against Iraq. One goal will do it and Australia's go-to man delivered on 83', just six minutes after running on the pitch. In 2009, Kennedy moved from the Bundesliga to the J-League where he topped the goal scoring ladder two seasons running.

Robbie Kruse

Age 25 **Position** Forward
Club Bayer Leverkusen
Appearances 28

Known for his penetrating forays from the right, Kruse has emerged as a fully-fledged star of the Green and Gold. A career breakthrough stint with Fortuna Dusseldorf led to a three-year deal with Bundesliga heavyweights Bayer Leverkusen this year. It's been a big few months for the Aussie who scored a brace in his starting debut and had his first taste of Champions League action.



Mathew Leckie

Age 22 **Position** Second Striker/Right Winger
Club FSV Frankfurt
Appearances 4

The explosive forward made the move to Germany following two standout years with Adelaide United and, after putting in the hard yards, has hit a rich vein of form in his second season with FSV Frankfurt in 2. Bundesliga. Leckie has bagged five goals in 10 appearances for club and fired home his first international goal last month in the 3-0 drubbing of Canada.

AUSTRALIA V COSTA RICA

Fill in numbers as line-ups are announced

AUSTRALIA

GOALKEEPERS
- [ ] Mitch **Langerak**
- [ ] Matt **Ryan**

DEFENDERS
- [ ] Jason **Davidson**
- [ ] Ivan **Franjic**
- [ ] Ryan **McGowan**
- [ ] Lucas **Neill**
- [ ] Alex **Wilkinson**
- [ ] Rhys **Williams**
- [ ] Michael **Zullo**

MIDFIELDERS
- [ ] Oliver **Bozanic**
- [ ] Mark **Bresciano**
- [ ] James **Holland**
- [ ] Mile **Jedinak**
- [ ] Matt **McKay**
- [ ] Mark **Milligan**
- [ ] Tommy **Oar**
- [ ] Tom **Rogic**
- [ ] Dario **Vidosic**

FORWARDS
- [ ] Tim **Cahill**
- [ ] Josh **Kennedy**
- [ ] Robbie **Kruse**
- [ ] Mathew **Leckie**

GOALSCORERS

COSTA RICA

DEFENDERS
- [ ] Christian **Gamboa**
- [ ] Giancarlo **González**
- [ ] Johnny **Acosta**
- [ ] Oscar **Duarte**
- [ ] Junior **Díaz**
- [ ] Bryan **Oviedo**

FORWARDS
- [ ] Jonathan **McDonald**
- [ ] Joel **Campbell**
- [ ] Álvaro **Saborío**

GOALKEEPERS
- [ ] Keilor **Navas**
- [ ] Patrick **Pemberton**

MIDFIELDERS
- [ ] Christian **Bolaños**
- [ ] José **Miguel Cubero**
- [ ] Celso **Borges**
- [ ] Yeltsin **Tejeda**
- [ ] Esteban **Granados**
- [ ] Carlos **Hernández**
- [ ] Diego **Calvo**
- [ ] Kenny **Cunningham**

GOALSCORERS

THE OPPOSITION: COSTA RICA

LIFE OR DEATH!

Inspired by Borussia Dortmund, Costa Rica knew how vital it was to get to Brazil 2014 for the tiny Central American nation...and the Ticos did it by killing a few football giants along the way

WORDS KATHY STONE

THERE was never any doubt what the only goal of FIFA World Cup qualification meant to Costa Rica. Even so President Laura Chinchilla's exuberant response brought the passion of the moment into sharp focus.

As Los Ticos booked their ticket with a 1-1 draw against Jamaica in September the political leader posted a series of rapid fire tweets.

One read (translated): *To those skeptics, and to those who did not believe in us: Yes we did, dammit!*

And with two games to spare.

Bring it on! seems to be the message from Central America's most successful footballing nation as they prepare for their fourth World Cup. Runners-up to Mexico in the group qualifiers, they stormed into the final phase to emerge second behind CONCACAF powerhouse USA.

In the end they outstripped fellow qualifier Honduras, as well as Mexico, Panama and Jamaica.

A mean defence – conceding only seven times in the final phase – and a five from five home-win record certainly smoothed the road to Rio.

In addition to brushing aside any residual disappointment from the South Africa 2010 play-off loss to Uruguay, they have collected some impressive scalps along the way.

BRYAN RUIZ

Costa Rica's 3-1 victory over the USA last month is a warning

"We are to defend the Costa Rican shirt. It never crossed my mind to have any other attitude."

The 3-1 defeat of Jurgen Klinsmann's Stars and Stripes in last month's grudge rematch in San Jose is a case in point.

The result consigned the US to their eighth straight defeat in Costa Rica and added to the Latin American nation's growing reputation.

They may have a population of only 4.6 million in an area less than a 10th the size of New South Wales but the Costa Ricans don't think small.

If this is a new era for the Central Americans, then much of the credit must go to the team's mentor Jorge Luis Pinto.

The 60-year-old Colombian – in his second go at the post after an ill-fated stint in 2004-05 – clearly has unfinished business.

Since his appointment in 2011 Pinto has set about marshalling his prodigiously talented youngsters and experienced veterans into a formidable unit.

Even with their ticket to the world game's global showpiece assured, they refused to take their foot off the pedal.

In their last match against a struggling Mexico outfit they promised a full throttle attack. Anything less was unthinkable.

"We are to compete, defend the Costa Rican shirt," Pinto told *fifa.com* in the lead up to the October clash.

"In no way has it crossed my mind to have other behaviour or attitude. All those who think that way are wrong."

He added: "Tomorrow is a match of life and death, we love those kind of matches."

More likely it was Mexico's demise he had in mind. At Estadio Nacional they inflicted a demoralising 2-1 defeat on El Tricolor.

Their rivals promptly appointed their fourth coach in six weeks ahead of a last chance play-off against New Zealand. Costa Rica is ranked 31 in the world and more than half of the squad plies its trade abroad in the top flight leagues of Europe and in the United States' MLS. Players from the English Premier League, La Liga and Bundesliga bring a battle-hardened spine to a technically adroit side.

Ex Melbourne Victory hero now at Wellington Phoenix, Carlos Hernandez

Pinto has spoken about instilling a Dortmund-inspired speed and accuracy into the team. One person who will be watching with interest when they take on the Socceroos in Sydney is Gerry Gomez.

The Aussie-based coach grew up playing football on the streets of San Jose before making the move Down Under at the age of 17.

Gomez, who turned out twice for the Socceroos B team in 1985, understands the visiting team's passion. The Ticos legend is woven into the tiny nation's DNA.

It has been forged in the fires of on-field battle since 1921 when, in their first national team match, they carved up a hapless El Salvador 7-0.

All of which means the 53-year-old's loyalties will be sorely tested when the nation of his birth faces off against his adopted country for the first time.

"Representing Australia was one of the highlights of my life, Gomez said. "It was something I will always cherish even if it was only a few games. These are good memories you can't erase.

"I was so excited (to hear about the match) but with mixed feelings because I've lived here for 35 years. But this is a historic game and I will be there."

Like so many others, Gomez places much of the credit for Costa Rica's revival at the feet of the coach. Pinto, he says, is a hard taskmaster but "has done wonders" with a squad that includes the likes of wily playmaker Bryan Ruiz (Fulham) and La Liga goalkeeper Keylor Navas (Levante UD) ▶

"We've a very good generation of players. We're going to be in very good shape at the World Cup."

"Traditionally, we are a very technical team but he has brought new dimensions," Gomez said. "And he keeps renewing the squad with young players.

"They are a very dynamic young team. Joel Campbell (Olympiacos, on loan from Arsenal) has been four years in Europe and is only 21. The players are getting excellent experience playing in those leagues."

A couple of names familiar to home fans have found their way into the squad for tonight's historic clash.

Former Johnny Warren medalist Carlos Hernandez, who once thrilled Melbourne Victory supporters with his on-field wizardry, is one. The silky-skilled attacking mid recently returned to the A-League from India to press his case for Rio.

"Of course I want to make the squad because it is every footballer's dream," the 31-year-old said. "If I play well and keep fit I think I have a good chance of going to Brazil."

Likewise his compatriot and Wellington Phoenix teammate, Kenny Cunningham, has ambitions to join La Sele (the Selection) on their fourth World Cup adventure

It could be strategic, but the 28-year-old who has been a regular in the World Cup qualifiers, is unwilling to single out any danger players for the Socceroos. The Aussies, he says, should watch out for "everyone".

"Our national team is just that, a team with no standout stars - although (Ruiz) plays for Fulham in the English Premier league," Cunningham said

"That is why we went so well in qualifying. It is a good group where everyone knows what job they have to do."

Midfield maestro Celso Borges highlighted the squad's spirit, unity and stability as reasons for success.

"The group's really clicked and everybody gets along well," the 25 year-old *fifa.com*.

"We've got a very good generation of players and we're going to be in very good shape come next year's World Cup. We're aiming to make our own slice of history."

He added: "This feels really satisfying. More than anything, it feels almost like setting the record straight after what happened in qualifying for South Africa (2010)

"I can't say whether this is the greatest achievement of my career because it's not over yet, but without doubt it's one of those important landmarks that you never forget.

"This achievement is the reward for all the sacrifices I've made leaving my family behind to go and play in Europe, adapting to a new way of life and making all those gruelling long distance trips.

"But the whole country is really happy because we managed to achieve a goal that we've had to work really hard for."

Some have dared to dream of matching the heroics of their first World Cup in 1990 when they swept into the knock-out stages.

Two wins (Scotland and Sweden) and a narrow loss (1-0 Brazil) ushered them through, only to fall 4-1 to Czechoslovakia.

It is a feat the country failed to replicate in either France 1998 or Korea-Japan 2002 when they were bundled out in the group stages.

One thing is clear, the three-times CONCACAF Championship and Gold Cup winners are not heading to Brazil to make up the numbers.

THE OPPOSITION: COSTA RICA

JOEL CAMPBELL

KEYLOR NAVAS

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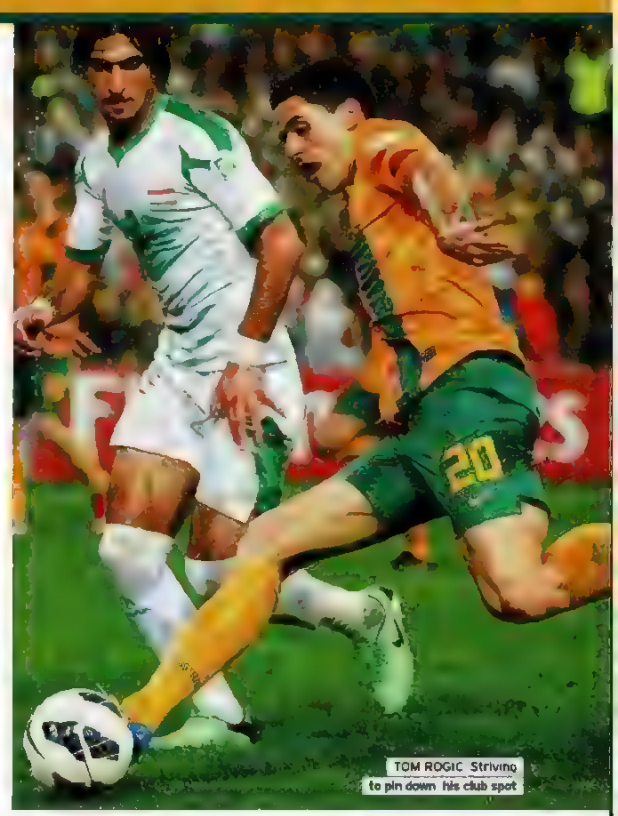
JASON DAVIDSON: The answer at leftback?

JAMES HOLLAND: Chance to shine in midfield

BRAZIL IN THEIR SIGHTS

TOMMY OAR: Staked his claim at a young age



TOM ROGIC: Striving to pin down his club spot

BRAZIL IN THEIR SIGHTS

Seven months out from the FIFA World Cup and Australia looks set to go through a renaissance with an injection of youth into the Socceroos squad under new coach Ange Postecoglou. Are these some of the boys for Brazil?

WORDS KATHY STONE

THERE was a time when even the names of Kewell, Schwarzer, Bresciano and Cahill barely raised an eyebrow – albeit in the distant past.

Now, slowly but surely, a new generation of game-changers are starting to etch their names in the public consciousness.

Names such as Tom Rogic, Mathew Leckie and Tommy Oar are the go-to when conversation turns to where next for the Socceroos?

Throw in Jason Davidson or a couple of bolters like Jackson Irvine and Curtis Good and the discussion could bog down for hours.

Former Socceroos coach Holger Osieck was criticised for not giving his rising stars an extended run in the national team. Now there's barely time to find their feet.

With the 2014 FIFA World Cup kick-off just seven months away, the Aussie starlets can't afford to finesse their way into the reckoning.

Former Socceroo and SBS commentator David Zdrilic said the clock is ticking for many of the young guns hoping to book their ticket to Brazil.

"I'm certainly thinking that (new Socceroos coach) Ange Postecoglou will be looking at younger players," Zdrilic said.

"The problem is that there's not much game time left for him to really experiment that much."

The inclusion of Tom Rogic in Postecoglou's first squad was no surprise. The meteoric rise of the Celtic playmaker had pundits searching for superlatives.

In 2011 he won a coveted place at the Nike Academy via The Chance global talent search and by January the following year he was the subject of a European club feeding frenzy.

The Hoops signed him to a five-year deal, with manager Neil Lennon describing the former Central Coast Mariners star as "tall, elegant, with quick feet, excellent technique, and an eye for a goal".

Rogic responded with incredulity to his whirlwind ride from the amateur ranks of Belconnen United to one of Europe's most storied clubs.

"It sounds quite bizarre and I guess, in a way, unheard of, so to be here now after playing local league two years ago, it's been a very good journey," the X-factor player said.

But Postecoglou has warned a lack of first team football - he has started one game for Celtic and made a handful of appearances off the bench - is undermining Rogic's World Cup chances.

Even Osieck, stung by criticism that he used the attacking mid too sparingly retorted: "I know how good he is, but he is not playing."

Zdrilic said Australia's stars-in-the-making must strike a balance between the lure of big clubs and the need to play regular football.

"You should be looking, especially young guys, at going to strong leagues," he said. ▸

A SALUTE TO SCHWARZER

LEGENDARY keeper Mark Schwarzer was a humble hero who saved the Socceroos on so many occasions yet never chased fame. At the age of 41 with 109 caps, he's called time on his international career – but will never be forgotten by fans.

To be number one

The battle for Australia's gloves

It was one of the great rivalries of Australian football. For years, Mark Schwarzer and Zeljko 'Spider' Kalac battled it out for the No.1 jersey with ructions occasionally spilling over into the press.

It came to a head during the 2006 FIFA World Cup when coach Guus Hiddink dropped Schwarzer in favour of Kalac for the group match against Croatia.

The decision almost cost the Aussies a round of 16 berth when Spider made a couple of howlers – and Schwarzer was duly reinstated between the sticks.

As every shot-stopper knows, there's only be one.

But following Schwarzer's shock retirement from international football, a new race for the gloves has emerged, with Borussia Dortmund's Mitch Langerak and Club Brugge's Mat Ryan seen as the heirs apparent.

Both were named in Ange Postecoglou's squad for Costa Rica and all going well, both will have a long time to fight for their place in the goalkeeping pecking order.

After all, Schwarzer was 41 and two World Cups to the good when he finally pulled the plug on his Green and Gold career. Queenslander Langerak is just 25 but still has a few years on Western Sydney product Ryan at 21.

Langerak, No 2 at a powerhouse club in the German Bundesliga, one of the giant leagues of Europe, has tasted Champions League action but has limited first team football. Ryan is first choice keeper at Club Brugge in the Belgian topflight where he has consigned more experienced glovemen to the bench.

In October, Langerak had the dubious honour of lining up between the sticks against France who duly thumped the Socceroos 6-0. The result could have been worse but for the efforts of the young keeper. Both shared goalkeeping duties in the subsequent 3-0 defeat of Canada but were rarely troubled.

The former Hyundai A-League stars – Langerak at Melbourne Victory and Ryan at Central Coast Mariners – paid tribute to Schwarzer's influence on their careers.

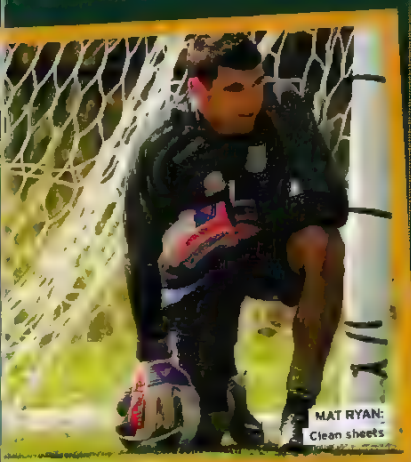
Ryan spoke of the implications of the big man's retirement to *Fox Sports*. "Obviously with there being no clear backup to own the spot is there for the taking for whoever can step up and show that they can do the job consistently," he said.

Postecoglou has hailed the attributes of the rising stars, describing them as "exceptional young goalkeepers" but went on to say there are others in the frame such as 32-year-old Adelaide United custodian, Eugene Galekovic, who he rates highly.

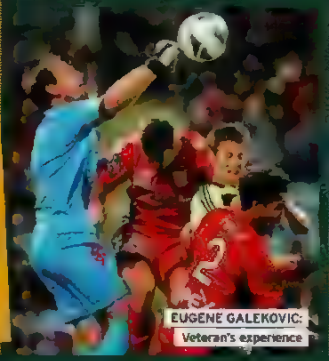
The Newcastle Jets' Mark Birighitti, 22, is another that often gets a mention when he turns to the future.

"It's one area that we've never really had a problem with – the goalkeeping department," SBS commentator David Zdrilic said.

"I think that's the least of our problems. We've got at least three and you can name another few – four or ten of that could easily step into the number one position."



MAT RYAN:
Clean sheets



EUGENE GALEKOVIC:
Veteran's experience

MITCH LANGERAK:
Putting his hand up

"On the other hand, if you're going to a strong team or a strong league and you're not playing it's very hard to take your game to the next level."

Another Celtic signing, Jackson Irvine, took the step of going out on loan in a bid to ramp up his first team experience.

And before inking a deal with Scottish Premiership side Kilmarnock, the 20-year-old gave a glimpse of his potential.

During a preseason friendly in Dublin, he turned in a Man of the Match performance against EPL giants Liverpool. Irvine more than held his own in a midfield battle against Anfield icon Steven Gerrard and his midfield marshal, Lucas.

It's been a big year for the former Scotland U19 and Young Socceroos U20 World Cup representative. Last month he picked up his first senior cap for the Aussies after declaring his allegiance to the Green and Gold and came off the bench late in the second-half of the Socceroos 3-0 win over Canada at Craven Cottage.

The towering centre mid topped off a great week with a cracking 20-yard belter to help Killie collect their first win of the season.

Irvine didn't make Postecoglou's squad for Costa Rica but the former Frankston Pines player has made no secret of his World Cup ambitions.

"To play for the Socceroos in Brazil would be everything, it's what you play this game for – every young player around the world strives for that opportunity," he told *The Guardian*.

Explosive forward Mathew Leckie came close to dumping his Germany gig and heading back to the Adelaide United killing fields where he ran riot with his fast, robust and fearless play.

But the 22-year-old, struggling with niggling injuries and a lack of game time, stuck it out and has since been rewarded for his hard work and perseverance.

JACKSON IRVINE:
Dreaming of Brazil

"To play for the Socceroos in Brazil would be everything, it's what you play this game for..."

It's the kind of pressure-cooker experience that will stand the Australian in good stead if he gets his opportunity on the world stage.

In June this year he signed a three-year deal with second tier FSV Frankfurt after a loan spell from Bundesliga powerhouse Borussia Mönchengladbach.

It proved an inspired decision. The Melbourne-born player has struck a rich vein of form this season, knocking in five goals in 10 games.

That momentum has carried into the national team where Leckie notched up his first goal for the Socceroos in their clash with Canada.

The Aussie told *bundesliga.com* he never "for one second" regretted dropping down a division. On signing the forward to a permanent deal the club's executive director Uwe Stöve said: "Mathew showed last season that he can really improve our side."

It's almost inconceivable that Eredivisie star, Tommy Oar, won't be in the departure lounge for Brazil come June next year.

A key player for his club, FC Utrect, the Socceroo's best moment in Green and Gold came earlier this year.

After a lovely jinking run past three Samurai Blue defenders, the 21-year-old unleashed a deceptively looping left-footed strike – or was it a cross? – that curled into the net.

That stunning June night in Saitama secured Australia a draw against their arch rivals, Japan, and banked another vital point towards 2014 FIFA World Cup qualification.

Oar was just 17 when he burst onto the scene at Brisbane Roar. His 2010 Socceroos debut against Indonesia in an AFC Asian Cup qualifier led many to draw comparisons with Australia's most celebrated left-footer Harry Kewell.

The following year his scorching 30-yard free kick at the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Colombia was voted goal of the tournament.

But underpinning his on-field wizardry the diminutive player has a steely resolve to make it big for club and country and last season Voetbal International voted him the 10th best player of the Dutch season.

Meanwhile, Australia's left back woes have kept Netherlands based Jason Davidson in the frame for a FIFA World Cup berth.

The Heracles Almelo defender, and son of Socceroos great Alan Davidson, is enjoying ▸

Legacies of 2006 and 2010

JAMES HOLLAND
Pim's pick

NEIL KILKENNY
Lost grip on Roos spot

CURTIS GOOD
Future hope

"We have a great generation of young players coming through. Every single player has desire..."

a breakthrough season in the Dutch topflight But it was a baptism of fire when he debuted for the national team in August last year, scoring an own-goal in Australia's dispiriting 3-1 defeat to Scotland.

Against France last month, he came on as a half-time substitute for David Carney, who was wrongly pinged for a handball, with the resulting penalty opening the floodgates for a 6-0 defeat.

The third time's the charm, though, and it was an encouraging first start for the 22-year-old as Australia rebounded from the Paris loss with a win against Canada.

Davidson is clearly made of stern stuff having been brought up in the school of hard knocks – literally. During his teenage years he had his head shaved and was smacked twice in the face by coaches as part of a punishing training regime in the Japanese development system

After all that, Brazil would seem like a walk in the park. Now a regular starter at club level, with a goal to his name, the resilient defender has put his good season down to consistency.

He told FourFourTwo: "I can't complain, just happy I'm playing week in, week out, just trying to stay consistent and playing as much as I can this year."

If every World Cup team needs a bolter then Curtis Good would certainly be it. The 20-year-old isn't the first name that pops to mind, and didn't make Postecoglou's first squad, but with the Socceroos' coach targeting a central defence make-over, he could just be a dynamite season away from selection.

That all depends on getting game time with Newcastle United. The ex-Melbourne Heart defender looked set to get his EPL debut recently after injuries cut a swathe through the club's defensive stocks.

That didn't happen but the former Nunawading City junior and AIS graduate is not one to wait for opportunities. After several starts for Newcastle Reserves last season he went out on loan to League Two side Bradford City and played in the 2013 League Cup final against Swansea City. He's on record as saying the World Cup is a definite goal.

Of course, young overseas-based players are not the only ones in the running to be our boys in Brazil.

The Hyundai A-League's Gen Next is firmly on the radar, with Postecoglou singling out the likes of in-form James Troisi, 25, Trent Sainsbury, 21 and Tomi Juric, 22.

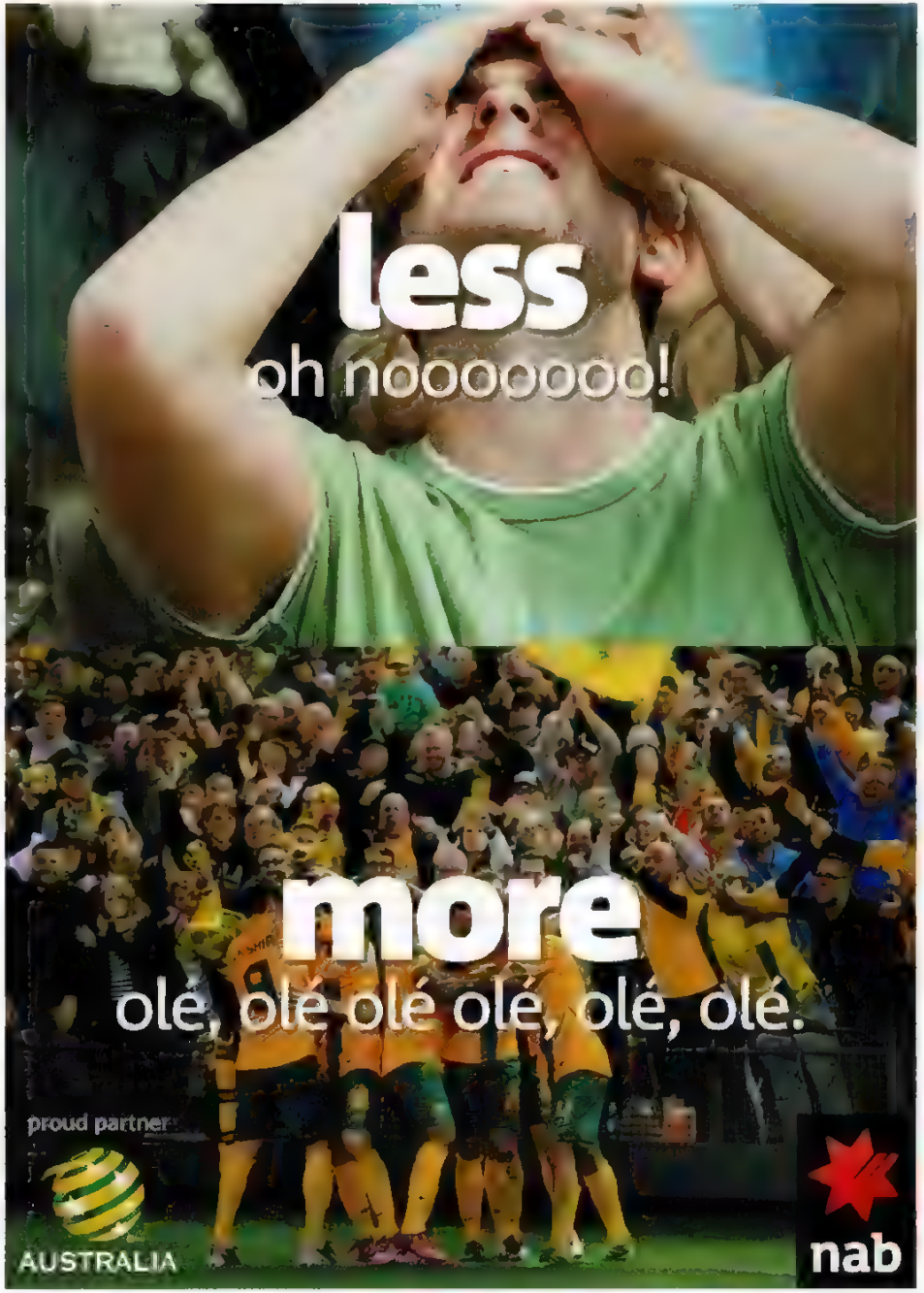
But he added: "(It's) only four to five games into the season ... come March, it will be 20-odd games and my message to them is maintain that form and you will get a look in."

Time may not be on their side, but Zdrilic has no doubt that Australia's young pros can handle the pressure of international football. Heart and desire has never been an issue.

"I don't think any young player goes into a camp or game not having the right attitude," he said.

"I certainly think every player aspires to play for the Socceroos and do their best when they get there.

"We have a great generation of young players coming through. The desire – every single player has that. They wouldn't be selected for Australia if they didn't." ●



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ANGE: I DON'T DO STAR STRUCK

Friend or foe, reputations count for nothing to new Socceroos coach Ange Postecoglou. With just seven months to regenerate the side before Brazil 2014, every playing spot is up for grabs – and every potential rival can be beaten. No backwards steps...that's the spirit of the Socceroos for Postecoglou

WORDS KATHY STONE **PORTRAIT** KEVIN AIRS

THIS year just gets better and better for Ange Postecoglou. First he coached the Foxtel A-League All Stars against Manchester United. Next he led his Melbourne Victory side in a spirited display against his boyhood heroes, Liverpool, at a sold-out G. And the best was yet to come.

Last month the multi title-winning club coach signed a five-year deal, replacing German tactician Holger Osieck at the helm of the Socceroos. It's been a helter skelter ride for Australia's most decorated domestic coach, who's gone straight to work turning around a dispirited camp which suffered some heavy defeats after limping over the qualification line for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

If the new Socceroos mentor is fazed by the task ahead, he doesn't show it. All eyes are now watching to see how Postecoglou's dream run will develop over the next seven months until the biggest show on earth in Brazil.

Facing Manchester United, then Liverpool, new Socceroos coach – this must be the very definition of all your Christmases coming at once...

Pretty much, and with the FIFA World Cup on the horizon – you're right, it's been a massive year. I feel fortunate that I've had these opportunities and I'm looking forward to the next chapter.

A lot has been made of the fact an Australian is again coaching the Socceroos but you've been quick to play that down.

Like everyone, I'd like to think I was the best person for the job. The fact that I'm Australian is a bonus. But I understand that some people see it as a good thing. In the end, though, it's about how well I do the job.

From my perspective I love the fact that I'm coaching my national team and I see it as a massive honour for me.

Tell us about pulling this first squad together against Costa Rica – it must be very different to selecting a club side.

It was an interesting challenge. You sit down and you've got a list of all these names and you realise the breadth and depth and width of where our players play all over the globe. Then it's about pulling all that together with a view to the kind of football I want to play and what players could potentially fit into that.

Also, I was mindful of the fact this was my first squad and a lot of players that have played in the campaign deserve an opportunity to show what they can do – to see if they can fit into what I'm building. It was challenging but I found it really enjoyable and I'm pretty pleased with the 22 names that have come together for this game and I'm looking forward to seeing how they perform. ▸

Postecoglou did the domestic double with Brisbane Roar

He was midway through his revolution at Victory when his country called

Of course every man, woman and child will have their own passionate take on the best XI. Are you ready for that national conversation?

I'm well aware that I live in the land of public opinion and everything I do will be scrutinised. To begin with, even in my house, my wife and son usually think I haven't done the right thing. That's all part and parcel of it. And, look, I love that. I love the fact that the people care and I love the fact that people are passionate about our Socceroos. So from my perspective it's great. I'm still going to make my own decisions. No doubt along the way I'll get some wrong but hopefully, over time, people will see that I've got more right than wrong and the team's progressed.

There was talk of wholesale changes to the squad but you've been a bit more considered in your approach.

I don't have a lot of time between now and the World Cup so every decision I make is going to be pretty crucial. I'd rather make selections in an informed way rather than just react to something that's happened in the past. I've probably got four or five games between now and the World Cup and I want to make sure that the decisions I make are as well informed as they possibly can be. So I want to bring players in, work with them and see who fits in there rather than prejudge things.

That probably gives you about 450 minutes of on-field play to work your magic. How that's a challenge.

It is, but that's international football I guess, and those are the parameters that every national coach has to face. It's on a four-year cycle and it would be great if I had that time, but I don't, and we deal with what's in front of us. I think we can create a foundation pretty quickly. That's why every game we have, every camp we have, is going to be vitally important. This first game against Costa Rica obviously comes really early in my tenure but I don't want to waste it. I think it's too valuable a time for us to disregard it, which is why I want to ensure that coming out of it we'll have achieved something.

What do you know about the Costa Rican team?

Costa Rica are a very good side. They've qualified for the World Cup and their football's improving. They've got players now playing in some of the top leagues in Europe. So it will be a great challenge for us. From our perspective it will be a good measure of where we're at in terms of what we're trying to achieve.

Is it too early to worry about the win?

Winning is always important. More than anyone I know, I love winning. And more than that, I hate losing. I'd hate to be sitting on a loss for a few months, I'd be really grumpy. Club football can change in a week but not international football.

So yes, we want to win. But just as importantly, hopefully we instil some belief in the players because they've been through a tough time as well.

Hopefully we instil some confidence and belief in them moving forward so that when the World Cup comes around we're in good shape.

You've talked a lot about the culture of the Socceroos and restoring pride in the team shirt. What do you mean?

That's just observations from afar. I grew up watching the national team. I've always watched our Socceroos taking on the world and never taking a backward step. And I just think, in recent times, we've kind of lost that a little bit. We've started saying things like – for our country we're doing well, or, we shouldn't expect to be able to compete against the world's best. That's just not what the national team is about, it's never been about that.

The game is in a really healthy state at the moment but even when it wasn't in a healthy state, the Socceroos were still playing, still taking on the world, and sometimes beating the best teams in the world. Sometimes we didn't, but we always had a go. I think that's really important. We want to play a certain style for sure but we should never underestimate the fact that in the Australian sporting landscape, it's not in our DNA to take a backward step.

How will a Postecoglou-coached national team differ from what we've seen in recent years?

I think that's a difficult one to answer at this point. But over time I hope people will see. All the teams I've coached like to play a certain way – a possession-based attacking football – and certainly that's what I'll be trying to instil in our national team. Hopefully people will see that our national team has a real identity and an identifiable style of game, so that every time we play we'll be able to perform in a certain way. And with that, and with the growth of that, hopefully success comes.

You've lost one of the great servants of the game in goalkeeping legend Mark Schwarzer, who retired from international football.

It was a surprise because I had selected him in the squad. I respect his decision. It's obviously something he's thought about and discussed with everyone close to him. All you can do ▸

OUR WORLD CUP COACHES

RALE RASIC

Before Guus, there was Rale. In 1974, a Yugoslavian orphan by the name of Rale Rasic took Australian football fans and a semi-professional squad to West Germany on their first FIFA World Cup adventure. Years later Rale told *FourFourTwo*: "If I wrote the script and you asked me who I wanted to meet at the World Cup I would have said East and West Germany. East Germany were unbeaten in 80 games in Europe, the robots of world football, and West Germany – European champions." The script went to plan. The Socceroos met both footballing powerhouses on the field of battle along with Chile who finished third in the 1962 finals. The Aussies lost 2-0 to East Germany, 3-0 to West Germany and picked up a scoreless draw with the Latin Americans. Rasic was paid $10,000 for four years with the Socceroos.

GUUS HIDDINK

The honorary Aussie pulled off the Socceroos' greatest triumph. Hiddink's formidable reputation was further enhanced when he negotiated a tricky two-legged play-off with Uruguay to overcome 32 years of heartache and qualify the squad for the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany. A 3-1 win over Japan, 2-0 loss to Brazil and 2-2 draw with Croatia saw the team defy expectations and reach the knockout stages where a contentious penalty awarded to Italy at the death, saw the Socceroos bundled out. After the match the Dutch tactician said: "I can be very proud of the guys, of the boys, who performed in this World Cup, in all three matches and this match against a powerhouse of Europe ... if you analyse this coldly, we try to play good football, attractive football, but at the end we must make the results."

PIM VERBEEK

Mr Pragmatism led the Socceroos to the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa – for the first time through Asian qualifiers, where amazingly they conceded just one goal in the final round. The jubilation was short-lived, and the Aussies were smacked 4-0 in the opening game against Germany and lost Tim Cahill to a red card. It was widely regarded as the Group of Death and turned out to be exactly that for Verbeek's men who couldn't scrape through to the knock-out stages despite a heroic 1-1 draw with Ghana, following another red – this time to Harry Kewell – and defeating Serbia 2-1. After the last match, the exiting Dutch coach said: "There are no lessons – I'm just disappointed that we don't go on. It was a great result and a great performance but we are not in the final 16 and that is disappointing."

Timetable to the top The rise and rise of Ange Postecoglou

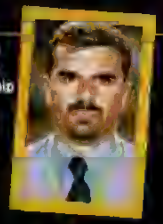
1965 Born in Greece

1975 Family moves to Australia

1986 Debuts for Socceroos

1998 Coaches South Melbourne to the NSL Championship and Premiership double

1999 Picks up his second NSL Championship as South Melbourne coach



2000 Begins a seven year stint as national youth coach

2009 Takes the reins at Hyundai A-League club Brisbane Roar

2011 Masterminds Roar's Championship and Premiership winning double with football that intoxicates the league

2012 Secures back-to-back grand final wins for the QLD powerhouse

2012 Signs a three-year deal with home town club Melbourne Victory

2013 Coaches first Foxtel A-League All Stars against Manchester United, lends Victory against Liverpool and takes the helm of the Socceroos ahead of Brazil 2014

The chosen one – Postecoglou has a five year deal as boss

Ange faced off-season friendlies against Liverpool and Man United

I'm not going to put a limit on what we can do... We'll see how far that takes us in a World Cup

really, and I guess the obligation is on me, is to acknowledge that he's been an absolute champion of our game for a very long time and has an unparalleled career. He's left a massive legacy for the game in this country and our national team.

And left some very big gloves to fill.
Yes. At the same time an opportunity exists for somebody else to take over and the two young keepers we've got in the squad now (Mitch Langerak, Mat Ryan) are both a similar age to when Mark first started his journey to becoming a Socceroos great. The opportunity lies for one of them, or somebody outside the squad, to forge their own name into the history of our national team.

With all the talk of regeneration, do you feel any obligation to those senior players who've helped the Socceroos qualify?
No, I don't think it's an obligation. At the same time, they have got us to the World Cup. Within that group there'll be players who fit into what I want to do moving forward. But I don't think it's an obligation. When it comes to the national team, all you can do is put your hand up to be selected. Then it's up to me to select the ones who will fit into what we're trying to create and the type of football we want to play. But it would be wrong of me, more than anything else, to disregard the players that have got us this far.

Have you set the Socceroos targets for Rio?
Not really. People see them as goals – I see them as limits. I understand when the World Cup comes around, everything that's happened beforehand will be forgotten and the whole nation will be watching and hoping that the Socceroos perform well and win. I'm not going to put a limit on what we can do. My job between now and then is to instil some real belief in the players, get them feeling good about our prospects and have them playing a style of football that will help us be successful. We'll see how far that takes us in a World Cup.

These heavy losses to France and Brazil under Holger Osieck's watch really took their toll. Did you feel the pain with the rest of the nation?
Definitely – it's my national team. It's my country. You want your national team to do well whether you're involved or not. Also, I don't think either of those results is a true reflection of where we're at. I think everyone was disappointed with the way it unfolded. The opportunity now is to turn that around and put it in the past.

Finally, when you get to Brazil are you going to allow yourself a moment to be star struck?
No – I don't do star struck. I'll obviously enjoy the environment because this is the World Cup and I'm privileged to be there and to participate in it. But all I'll be seeing is opposition jerseys and opposition players that I want to knock off. That's as far as it will go.

Acknowledging the supporters at his final Victory game

A SALUTE TO SCHWARZER

LEGENDARY keeper Mark Schwarzer was a humble hero who saved the Socceroos on so many occasions yet never chased fame. At the age of 41 with 109 caps, he's called time on his international career – but will never be forgotten by fans.

On the previous page is his penalty save against Uruguay in 2005 that took us to the 2006 FIFA World Cup, but his starting debut came here in 1993 against Canada

Once again, Schwarzer is the ice cool penalty hero against China in 2008

Schwarzer - the very definition of a safe pair of hands

From the English Premier League to the world stage with Australia, Schwarzer's career has been glittering

2001 in Melbourne and Schwarzer models a rare shorn haircut!

Across the country, A-League drama plays out in front of packed stadiums

A LEAGUE OF ITS OWN!

Star-studded squads and packed stadiums sparking with an electric atmosphere...it's all combined to divide cities, test loyalties, forge new friendships – and given Australia the finest club football we've ever seen. This is the Hyundai A-League 2013/14, and it's amazing.

WORDS KATHY STONE

TEN years ago, few could have imagined it how far we would have come, and in such a short time.

After a few years nibbling at the edges of the national sporting consciousness and gaining momentum, the latest Hyundai A-League season – only its ninth – has exploded into the mainstream.

Record numbers are turning up, tuning in and getting down with what's happening in the local league.

Sell-out crowds, white-knuckle derbies, superstar marquees and a crop of rising young guns are turbo-charging the fledgling competition to a whole new level.

The opening round witnessed 100,998 fans filing through the turnstiles to set a new aggregate record for the league.

Football Federation Australia boss David Gallop hasn't been squeamish about trumpeting the game's growing influence in a crowded sporting marketplace.

"I can genuinely say our best years are still ahead of us," Gallop told media at the season launch. "Football will become the largest and most popular sport in this country."

After just four rounds, the average match attendance had jumped by 38% on 2012/13. Suddenly Hyundai A-League games are the hottest, and hardest to get, tickets in town.

The grand final rematch between reigning Champions Central Coast Mariners and last season's Premiers, Western Sydney Wanderers, was sold out long before kick-off.

It's all going off, and not just on the pitch and in the stands. For the first time Friday night games can be seen live on free-to-air.

The Hyundai A-League debut on SBS2 delivered the channel its highest audience of the year. Combined with pumped up exposure on Fox Sports it means more eyes than ever are fixed on the full 90.

So how good is Season 9 of the Hyundai A-League? SBS commentator and ex-Socceroo David Zdrilic had just one word: "Brilliant."

"Attendances are up, the quality on the pitches is up, the coaching standards are up, and we now have A-League matches on free to air," he said.

"Football has taken a major jump in the last couple of years. It's been exciting, it's been a great start, and it can only get better."

And it's easy to see why.

Last season's headliners - Alessandro Del Piero, Shinji Ono and Emile Heskey - have been thrown back into the fray.

Over in the west, Perth Glory have returned fire by injecting some celebrity steel into their defence in the form of ex-Les Bleus star William Gallas. As if visitors to nib Stadium didn't have enough to worry about from the likes of Aussie hard man Jacob Burns... Gallas - a former Tottenham, Arsenal and Chelsea centre back – has been lured by the prospect of life on the football frontier.

Attendances are up, quality is up and now it's on free to air TV

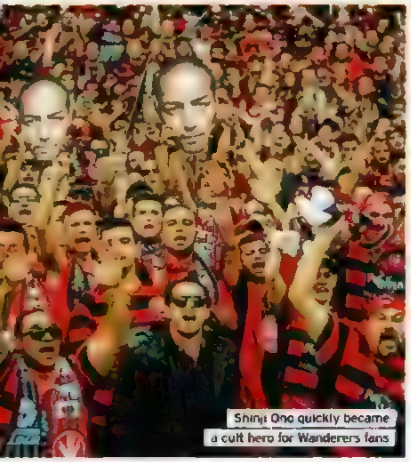
Meanwhile Aussie legend Harry Kewell has jetted back into Melbourne - but switched allegiances to Heart after lining up for city rivals Victory in Hyundai A-League season 2011/12.

Nipping at the heels of these illustrious veterans is a cast of dynamic youngsters eager to grab tomorrow's back page from their more celebrated teammates.

Players such as Tomi Juric, Mitchell Duke and Trent Sainsbury have staked out the "watch this" space.

Further turning up the heat on the pitch is the looming FIFA World Cup in Brazil. With the game's showpiece event kicking off in June, every weekend is an audition for former Hyundai A-league boss, now Socceroos head coach, Ange Postecoglou.

And it's not just the players who are attracting attention. Adelaide United hope to inject some Barca-esque magic into their play this season. ▶



Shinji Ono quickly became a cult hero for Wanderers fans

Del Piero transfixed Sydney FC fans from the moment he signed

The Reds have reeled in Spaniard and former Barcelona youth team coach Josep Gombau to revolutionise the squad and he clearly has the city in his thrall.

Meanwhile arch rivals Melbourne Victory have given skipper and former assistant coach Kevin Muscat a chance to cut his teeth in the big chair after Postecoglou's move to the national team.

Clearly the fans like what they see. Season tickets are being snapped up in record numbers. Total club memberships have skyrocketed by 26% on last year's figures.

Wanderers, who didn't even exist 20 months ago, have gone from zero to 16,000 members, bulging the seams at Parramatta's Pirtek Stadium.

Derby fuelled gate-takings have also soared as crosstown rivalries fire up. More than 45,000 packed Etihad Stadium to witness the Melbourne stoush between Heart and Victory.

In the harbour city, 40,388 clamoured to see Western Sydney Wanderers dismantle Sydney FC 2-0 at Allianz Stadium, while Newcastle Jets and the Mariners dished up a 2-2 classic in the F3 derby at Hunter Stadium.

There's enough intrigue on the pitch to fill three seasons. Wanderers have set about debunking any talk of "one-hit wonders" by jumping to the top of the table in just their second season.

Mariners have confirmed "there's more where that came from" by rebounding after another off-season clear-out of talent overseas. And Brisbane Roar are back where they belong - tying opposition defenders in knots.

It all sounds like good news to Hyundai A-League boss Damien de Bohun who is confident game day attendances will average around 14,000 this season. That puts the local comp within touching distance of the world game's heavy-hitters.

We're not that far from being in the top five or six leagues in the world

"We're actually not that far from being within the top five or six leagues in the world," de Bohun added.

"It's been the biggest start to the season on a few fronts. Two of the first three rounds broke the record for any previous attendance round, and there have probably been six or seven sell-outs across the league early in the season.

"We're certainly getting mass exposure through all media channels whether they be broadcast, newspaper, digital - that's gone up a gear.

"If you go back a couple of years, we were working hard to get football fans to the Hyundai A-League. What's shifted now is that sports fans are coming to the games."

It's not just the players and coaches that are lifting their game. The energy in the stands has shot through the stratosphere. The league's slogan this year is You Power the Game - and the fans have plugged in and are putting out.

There's no doubt supporters are kicking goals for the game, says de Bohun, who credits the passion from the support bays for crashing through to the mainstream.

"I got a text message from a friend of mine who was watching the Western Sydney versus Adelaide game at the pub," he said.

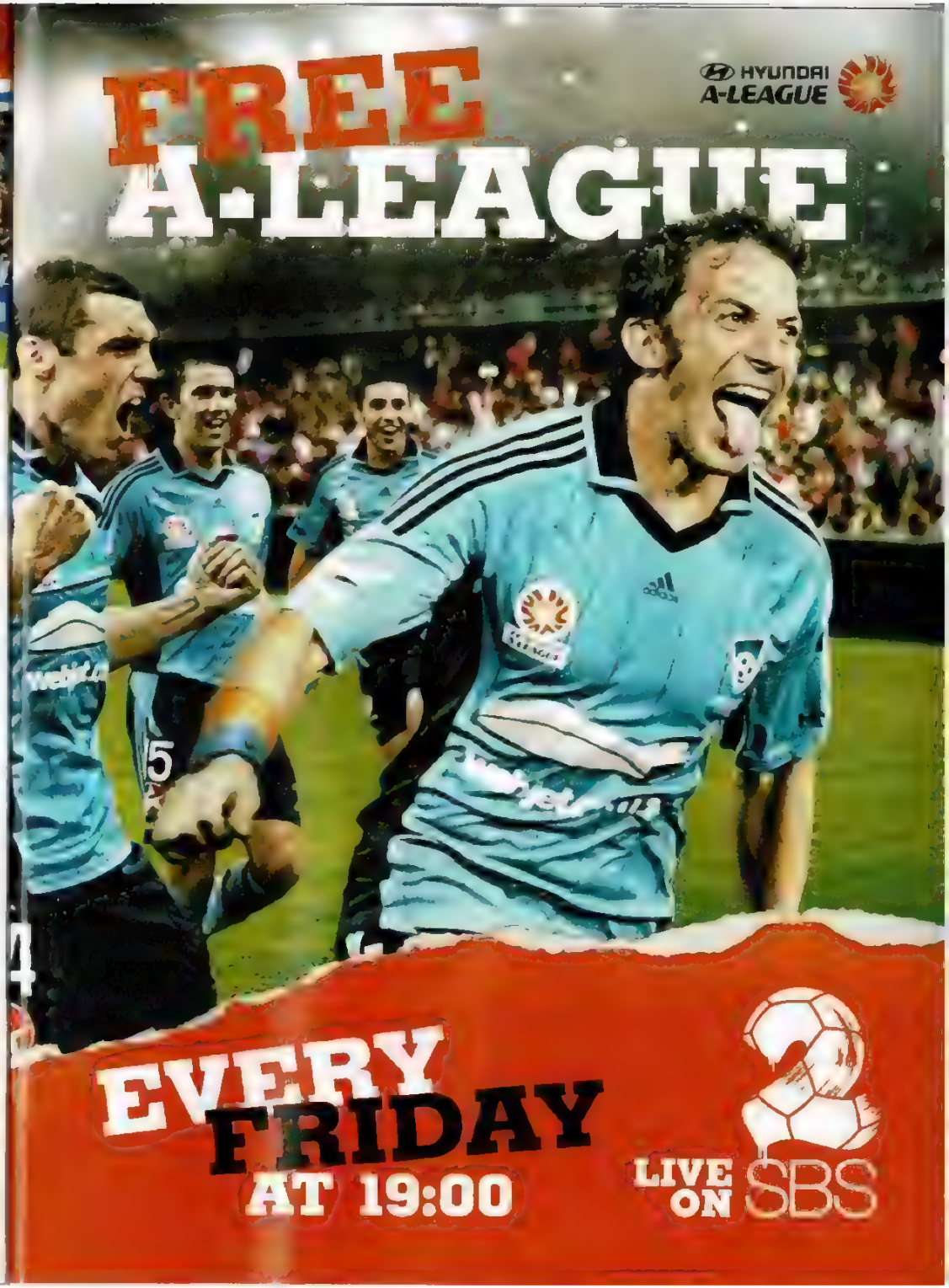
"When (Tomi) Juric scored the second goal, he said the unanimous view at the pub was that they'd never seen anything like this in Australian sport. The reaction from the football fans was amazing."

How far can football go, and how quickly? The AFC Champions League is gaining traction in the local market, some deep pockets are circling the FFA-funded Wanderers, and second tier National Premier Leagues have kicked off.

The current broadcast deal takes the league through to 2017 but after that, given the game's current rate of growth, a 12-team competition is not out of the question.

"I think the different parts of the jigsaw are beginning to come together," de Bohun said. "Probably the key message for us is that we really are the sport of growth in Australia. We're enjoying it, we're not getting ahead of ourselves, but we're enjoying it.

"Certainly the Hyundai A-League is the league of growth right now." ●



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MY GOLDEN XI

Fox Sports presenter Tara Rushton gives us her all-time greatest Socceroos XI, picked from the modern era to take us to glory

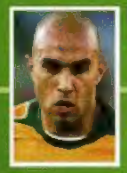
GK MARK SCHWARZER
Australia's most capped player, his heroics in goal were key to qualifying for the 2006 and 2010 World Cups. Such a shame he's decided to hang-up his gloves.

CB LUCAS NEILL
Hard to ignore his pedigree. Lucas played a key role in Australia's memorable run at the Germany 2006 and captained the side through South Africa.

CB ALEX TOBIN
A whopping 522 senior national league games in Australia and 87 games for the Socceroos. Alex was a leader on and off the field. Tough, towering but technically talented too.

CB CRAIG MOORE
A 10 year career playing in Europe and one of the mainstays of the Golden Generation. His memorable penalty against Croatia at the World Cup a standout.

CM NED ZELIC
Ned carved a stellar career in the Bundesliga and played across Europe while representing the Socceroos 34 times. He was one of my favourite players growing up.



RM MARK BRESCIANO
One of the most gifted players Australia has ever produced. Mark Bresciano may not get the plaudits that he deserves but he'd always be one of my first picks.

LM ROBBIE SLATER
Robbie was one of the most passionate players ever to wear the green and gold. I'll never forget his battle with Maradona in the play-offs against Argentina in 1993.

AM TIM CAHILL
It speaks volumes that Sir Alex Ferguson branded him as a player he wish he had signed. More than often Cahill has been the man to score the crucial goal we've needed.

RF FRANK FARINA
An Aussie trailblazer in Europe and another fierce competitor who'd give his all for the green and gold. Not many have captained their country and coached it as well.

CF MARK VIDUKA
At the height of his powers Mark was one of the best strikers in the world. Who can forget his four goals against Liverpool? Captain of the 2006 World Cup team and an idol to many.

LF HARRY KEWELL
You can't ignore the man voted the greatest Socceroo of all time. He's one of the youngest to debut for the Socceroos and also to score in a World Cup qualifier.

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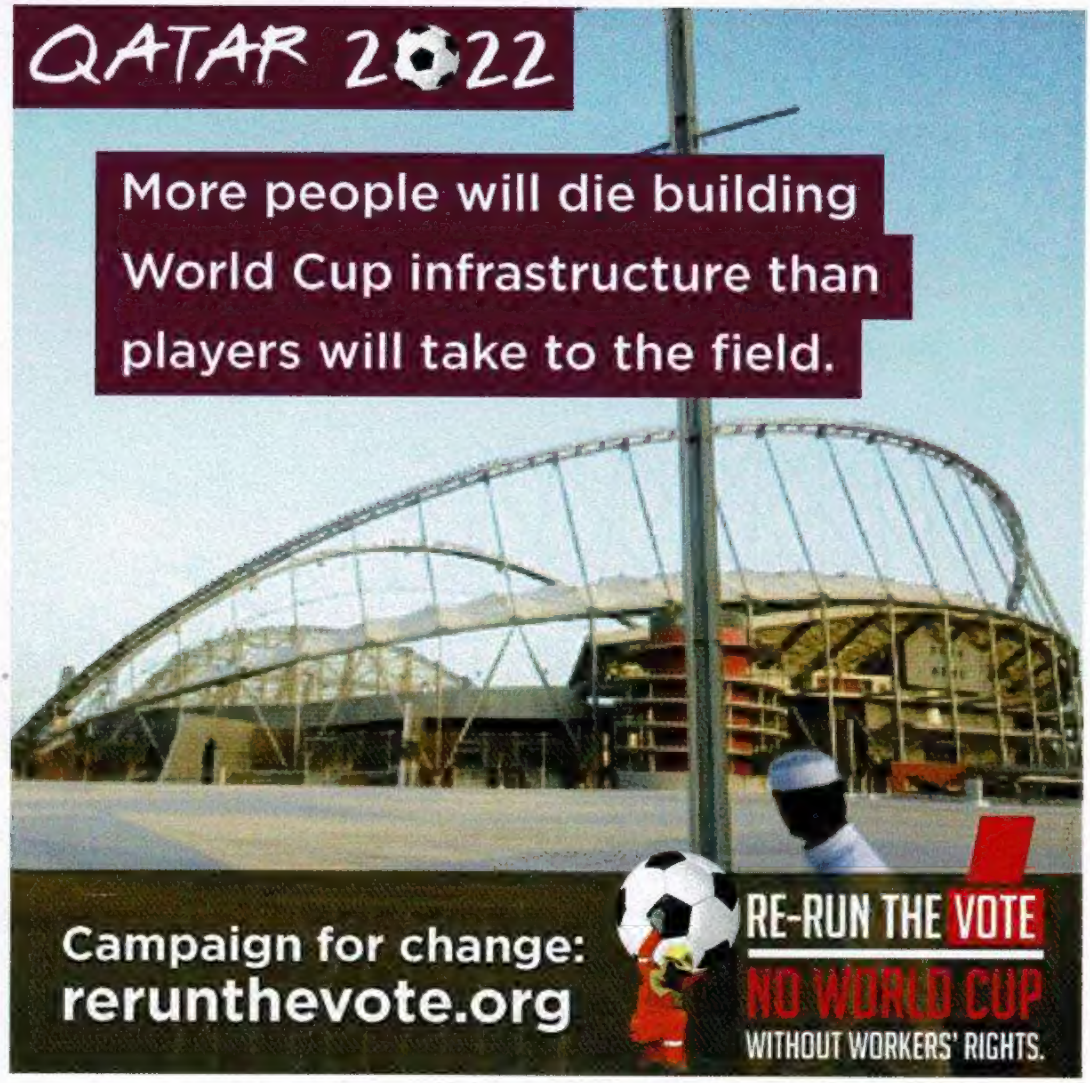
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